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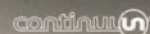


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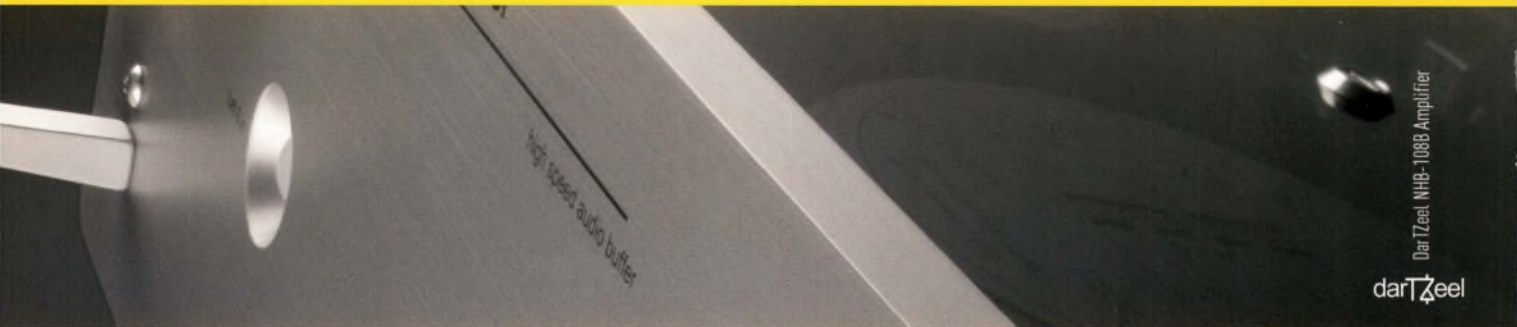
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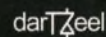
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**A**s the last issue was being printed, we learned of the sad passing of Tom Fletcher, after a long illness. Best known for the Nottingham Analogue range of turntables and tonearms, Tom's friendly, modest, no-nonsense demeanour and his idiosyncratic – yet utterly successful – approach to turntable design came to epitomise all that can be considered best about the last 30 years of UK audio; well-made products at comparatively reasonable prices, that don't fall prey to six-monthly redesigns and that keep on going for years and years. Several years ago, Tom passed the Nottingham Analogue baton on to family and staff, but rather than taking early retirement, he went on to found Fletcher Audio in an effort to bring some of his later ideas to market.

Made in mainland Europe by engineers that Tom trusted (despite their serious character flaws of not being powered by mug upon mug of tea), the first UK samples of Fletcher Audio Omega Point turntables landed in the UK in the same week Tom Fletcher passed away. We have a review of a Fletcher Audio deck planned, but that review can't help be a little bittersweet, especially to someone who felt the Spacedeck was one of the best turntables in history.

At first glance, it might seem hard to reconcile turntable sales in the technology-driven world of 2011. But in reality, the old and the new sit very comfortably together. Just like the printed page and the Apple iPad. Which is why *Hi-Fi+* now comes in App form, so you can download your favourite audiophile magazine from the comfort of your own backlit touchscreen. Just type 'hi-fi' into the App Store search engine and follow the downloading instructions. You don't even need to join one of the iPad magazine shops to ring the changes.

What's more, we'll be showing off our new iPad app – along with a full range of issues of *Hi-Fi+* past and present made out of real trees – at this year's Sound & Vision Show, at the Marriott City Centre Hotel, Bristol, from Friday 25th to Sunday 27th February, 2011. The Bristol Show has long been one of the key events on the UK audio calendar, and we hope we'll see you there!

Alan Sircom  
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Why did hi-fi get so expensive?

# music matters

by Alan Sircom

**OK, SO THIS MAGAZINE HAS ALWAYS BEEN ONE WITH** no upper limit and you can get really 'spendy' if you look at the dreamland equipment we get to play with, but even rank and file equipment has started significantly going up in price. And yet, no-one's getting absurdly rich out of the increasing price of audio admission.

The top end of the audio business has always been expensive. There's just more top end these days. Systems that cost as the equivalent of a decent house have been around and available since the mid 1980s, but there were always only one or two systems that reached past six figures. Now, there are myriad components that cost hundreds of thousands of pounds to play with. However, although this might worry those who are determined to own the best of everything without paying for it, these Premiership League products are not really the problem. In addition, despite harsh economic times, the number of people with truly gigantic amounts of disposable income to hand has increased exponentially over the last 25 years, at home and abroad. The luxury sector in everything from Rolexes to restaurants has expanded to meet this demand, and audio is no different.

The problem's not with the entry-level end, either. Electronics brands like Cambridge Audio, Marantz and NAD and speaker companies like KEF, Tannoy and Wharfedale (among others) still produce excellent products that don't break the bank. In fact, if you put the modern-day prices into an inflation calculator, these starter components are every bit as inexpensive as the budget legends of yesteryear. Yes, today you might need to spend £1,000 on a good system where 25 years ago you would have spent £500, but except for high-tech components like computers that get smaller and cheaper with each passing season, virtually anything you spent £500 on a quarter of a century ago costs £1,000 (or more) today.

The problem is the middle ground. Those £5,000 systems have – in very short order – become £10,000 systems. This has unsurprisingly upset the largest part of the hi-fi buying public, who feel that the audio industry has abandoned them in search of richer pickings.

Some of these price increases are related to fluctuations in currency – even products made in the UK are built using foreign-sourced components, all of which have increased by as much as 40% over the last two years simply because the pound is not as valuable as it was in 2008. Some are related to the changes in the global manufacturing world; China's vast and increasing demand for raw materials means that prices outside of China have increased dramatically. And some are

down to less people buying audio today; if your business is predicated on selling 100,000 things a year at £1 each, if you only sell 50,000 a year, either that £1 price goes up or your business goes down.

Unfortunately, there comes a time when prices become unsustainably high for that kind of product. It's possible for a £1,000 amplifier to become a £1,500 amplifier and still sell, because of the reasons described above, but not if a £1,000 amplifier becomes a £5,000 amplifier.

How this can change is unclear. VAT has increased, inflation isn't going to go away, the cost of materials are always going to rise and manufacturers need to raise prices to survive an increasing migration away from conventional audio products. And, high-end audio is largely predicated on the existence of bricks-and-mortar dealers, because of the need to demonstrate the differences between 'good' and 'great' audio in 'meatspace', that just cannot happen on a website, no matter how interactive.

However, a new generation of manufacturers is emerging to supply this gulf in the market. These companies often eschew the normal dealer-based network to supply direct. They work to lower overall margins across the board, and that means less innovative design and technology. Many – although not all – ship direct from China.

In truth, I'm not sure how I feel about such companies and products. I fully support the need for products at affordable levels, but I'm concerned that without that dealer base, the first time you actually hear products is when you get them home. Not only does this strike me as 'buying a pig in a poke', but could also effectively drive quality – as well as price – way down.

Nevertheless, this is something we must address. The 'guerilla audiophile' is already a force to be reckoned with, and we need to look at what sounds good, not just what sounds good and costs a fortune. +

# The Klipsch La Scala II ... back to mono

by Jimmy Hughes

**LET'S PLAY A LITTLE GAME.** Assume for a moment it's the late 1950s or early 1960s and you're a hi-fi enthusiast. Chances are, you'd own a single-speaker mono system. The loudspeaker itself would be fairly large and efficient, producing a solid powerful sound. There's no *hotseat*, so you can sit almost anywhere in the room to listen.

You're completely happy with the sound of your hi-fi system, but everyone's talking about 'Stereo'. What's worse, many new LPs are now being offered in a choice of mono or stereo. Finally, you get to hear stereo – and (frankly) you're blown away.

Problem is – upgrading to stereo means replacing virtually *everything*. You need a tonearm wired for stereo and a stereo pickup cartridge, not to mention a stereo amp. And then there's the loudspeaker problem. While your living room can accommodate one large enclosure, *two* would be totally out of the question.

Going *Stereo* means having to consider smaller loudspeakers. Inevitably, these would lack the scale you're used to. But, stereo seems to enhance breadth and width. Even with shoebox-size speakers, the impression of spatial depth (given a good stereo recording) seems quite remarkable.

Although you're loathe to get rid of your old large loudspeaker, you convince yourself that stereo from two smaller speakers will more than offset any losses in absolute quality. And in many ways it does. Playing stereo recordings of big choral works, there's a much greater sense of the musicians performing in your room.

For people today, it's perhaps hard to appreciate how and why stereo had such an incredible impact on listeners in the late '50s and early '60s. For many back then, the impression was overwhelming. Once they'd experienced the magic of stereo, there was no going back – mono became (virtually) unlistenable.

Nowadays, the stereo/mono debate hardly seems to matter. Agreed, it's Old Hat. The novelty value of stereo sound has long since worn off. But, equally the mono/stereo difference no longer seems as significant. Still, from time to time, you encounter those who say they're considering returning to mono. Mostly it's nothing but talk.

Would any modern hi-fi enthusiast *really* consider going back to a single-speaker mono hi-fi system? What would be the point? Aren't the benefits of stereo too good to sacrifice? Well, yes. But, suppose by returning to single speaker mono, you were able to go for a large loudspeaker – something demonstrably superior to anything smaller?

Stereo creates an illusion that makes it seem as though small speakers are much better than they are. Most early twin

channel converts were so seduced by what stereo had to offer, they either didn't notice (or deliberately overlooked) the fact that the sound was compromised by the limitations of small inefficient speakers.

Actually, my stereo/mono question was rhetorical; recently, a friend of mine did go back to mono. He'd been enjoying a stereo hi-fi system consisting of a Shanling MC-30 and a pair of Klipsch Heresy III loudspeakers. While very happy with the sound, he nonetheless hankered after something bigger and better.

Specifically, he'd fallen in love with Klipsch La Scala IIs. Unfortunately, he could not afford a pair. Lack of funds wasn't the only issue; the La Scala II is a big speaker, and he was worried about being able to position two for optimum results. Then he had a brainwave – why not go for a single La Scala II in mono? They're even *sold* singly,

While a *pair* of La Scala IIs was out of the question, physically and financially, a single La Scala II would be perfectly feasible – both in terms of room space and budget. So, Back to Mono it was; he P/X'd his Heresy IIIs, had the Shanling MC-30 wired for mono, and waited patiently for his single La Scala II to arrive.

The whole thing was a huge leap in the dark. But, once the mono La Scala II system was finally up and running, results confirmed that it had been a wise move. The loss of stereo was more than offset by an increased sense of scale. Good as the Heresy IIIs had been, the La Scala II (even just one in mono) was in a different league.

I recently went and auditioned his system, and was very taken by what I heard. The sound proved impressively full and 'big', with excellent presence and lots of fine detail. Sonically, the presentation had an unforced, totally relaxed quality – the music seemed to fill the room effortlessly, without needing to be played loudly.

The single La Scala II even seemed to produce a reasonable spread of sound – it



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▶ wasn't like the music was coming from a thin narrow slit. It had breadth and depth, and clarity was excellent. You could hear lots of detail, yet 'detail' wasn't being thrust at you. Overall, the sound was smooth, natural, and superbly integrated.

Vocals sounded solid and full; backing vocals could be heard very clearly. In some ways (and this is meant as a compliment) the set-up sounded like a giant Roberts Radio – smooth, rich, and easy on the ear. It did not shout 'hi-fi' at you. Bass was full, and clear, warm and round; the treble sounded clean and crisp, but not obvious.

Many hi-fi systems try to *impress*, blasting the ear with extremes of loud and soft and high and low to gain your attention. Being 105dB efficient, the Klipsch La Scala II can play very loud indeed – even when driven with just 3W. But at my friend's place, the sound was notable more for its naturalness and integrity. It sounded 'right'.

Maybe some hi-fi enthusiasts would judge the results 'disappointing' – not enough bang, crash, fizz, pop. But the music was served *handsomely*. Listening, you hardly noticed the equipment – the music took precedence. Singers and instrumentalists seemed to materialise before your ears, effortlessly filling the room with sound.

The sound had presence and immediacy, without being 'loud'. While the La Scala II can produce ear-splitting levels if need be, you don't need to turn the volume up excessively to create a room-filling sound. It's unusual to find a speaker capable of operating effectively at dynamic extremes – something only big Horns can do.

Tellingly, the owner mentioned in passing that his La Scala II mono set-up was the first and only hi-fi system he'd owned in the past 30 years where his wife didn't ask him to lower volume levels. All his previous systems she'd found too loud; but the La Scala IIs seemed to cast a spell over her.

The relationship between La Scala IIs and smaller less-sensitive loudspeakers is a bit like an ocean-going luxury liner compared to a speedboat. With both travelling at the same speed, the journey takes the same time. Only, one gives you an incomparably smoother more refined ride.

Most small inefficient speakers fall into the 'speedboat' category; the resulting sound is extrovert and forceful, with plenty of immediacy and impact. Yet, while the sound may be hugely visceral and physically exciting, essentially the whole experience is little more than a white-knuckle ride.

The La Scala II doesn't lack speed or excitement. But the 'ride' is beautifully smooth and effortless. Not in a bland boring sense, but more in terms of a demanding job being accomplished with consummate ease – like the way a great gymnast goes through a difficult dangerous routine and makes the whole thing look simple and easy.

Curiously, while the La Scala IIs sounded big and powerful, the effect was not the least bit imposing. Clarity was outstanding, and you seemed to be able to hear the subtlest nuance. Yet for all its room-filling presence and detail, the music was very relaxed and easy to 'talk over'. You were *addressed* but not *hector*ed.

Speaking personally, I hardly missed the absence of stereo. Indeed, having the sound reach your ears from a single point actually allowed you to concentrate on the music – you weren't being constantly 'distracted' by voices and instruments appearing at different points in the soundstage.

True, there remains a certain lack of *width* with mono – plus a slight 'dryness' and loss of ambience that occurs when two channels are condensed to one. Original mono recordings nearly always seem to have a drier, tighter, leaner sound than their stereo counterparts. But this is not a

major issue – you soon get used to it.

What's of greater importance is *the* way in which mono seems to 'focus' the sound. You seem to get a tighter cleaner bass with mono, and subtle pitch definition is enhanced. This is especially apparent on solo instruments like piano; mono sounds more *expressive*, and conveys a better idea of how the music is being played.

Stereo portrays a greater degree of hall ambience, and enhances the impression of aural space. But mono seems to focus the music and performance better – subtle inflections of tone colour and dynamics seem to 'tell' more potently. The benefits with stereo are very seductive, but its downsides are not so obvious.

Inevitably, perhaps, one wonders if adding a second for stereo would produce a major improvement. No doubt, there would be some definite benefits and important gains. But, there will also be placement problems, because the La Scala II is a mighty beast, weighing 175.5lbs. It's has a large footprint; 38.5 tall, 24.25 wide and 25.25ins deep. There are three drivers; a massive 15in bass unit in a folded horn, and two horn-loaded *compression drivers* for middle and top. It's big, but the beauty of single speaker mono is the freedom it gives regarding placement.

Like all horns, the La Scala II benefits from being heard at a certain distance. You get smoother integration and enhanced presence as you move back. Horn-loading produces greater immediacy compared to conventional speakers. This being the case, you don't want to sit too close for *fear* of being overwhelmed.

Ironically - although the system sounds great, and he's very satisfied with things as they are - my friend *is* flirting with the idea of adding a second La Scala II at some future date. But even in his larger than *average* living room, placing two big enclosures for optimum stereo *soundstaging* will not be easy or straightforward.

However, it's my belief his *Back to Stereo* fantasies are nothing but *talk*. Stereo? Much too pernickerty – way too fussy and impractical! Who wants to bother with all that *palaver*? I mean, stereo's an interesting gimmick and all that, but – you mark my words – *it'll never catch on....*+

Please send your letters to Hi-Fi Plus, Unit 22, Sandleheath Industrial Estate, Sandleheath, Hampshire, SP6 1PA, United Kingdom.  
Or email them to [editor@hifiplus.com](mailto:editor@hifiplus.com)

# incoming!

## **Flexibungs rides again!**

I want to let you know your tip in a past issue (65) concerning the use of the "flexibungs" in B&W 684 speakers was a great help to me. I bought a set of 684 speakers about five months ago but never experimented with the plugs. Now having 'tuned' the speakers to my room and ears with the plugs I have found (too my ears at least) a better sound. Your take on what the 684 owners manual should say concerning the flexibungs was right on. Thanks again.

**Marv Paisner**  
Nelson, BC, Canada

*Glad we could be of service - Ed*

## **Protect and Survive**

Congratulations on your 75th issue. Considering I've read most of them, at times, it occurs to me, how little I truly know about Hi-Fi. This is more apparent when one embarks on building a new system, which I'm currently in the process of doing.

Problems, which to you are obvious, can leave the amateur scratching his head and looking for advice. For example, a lot is written about the quality of the power feeding a system but little importance seems to be given to protecting the equipment. Indeed in the current magazine in your column *Back to Basics - Power Products* you list the three basic things a power product can do - protecting a system isn't one of them.

I currently use a P.S. Audio Duet, which has surge control, but having made the decision to use Nordost cables I can see it would be appropriate to change this for a Quantum Qbase which doesn't appear to have any protection. When I discussed this with my retailer he said it wasn't a problem because my mains board has circuit breakers and my CD/Amp have fuses in the back. He feels anything else that you put in the power line is bound to degrade the quality of the sound.

I've re-read Roy Gregory's article about building a new listening room with various exotic sockets and cables but no reference is made to protection.

So, how do the experts deal with this?

**Malcolm Phelan**

*The experts take a risk, and expect nothing catastrophic will happen to their systems. This is a paranoia we have inherited from the PC community, who were historically worried that the slightest spike in the power would cause disk heads to crash. The accent there is on the word 'history'. In fairness,*

*UK readers are relatively lucky because our power is relatively free from nasties, we have fuse upon fuse to trip out before the system suffers and our largest worry is a direct hit on the FM aerial from a lightning bolt. And - to be perfectly honest, if you have an FM tuner wired to your system and lightning strikes it, no amount of protection is going to help.*

*If you are worried, keep using the Duet, but your dealer is right. I'm not an actuary, but I'd place the chances of something bad happening is about as slim as Katie Price becoming the next Queen of England - Ed*

## **Back to Basics (slight return)**

You can totally blame Giles (Morrison) for this, as he started it with his reconstruction of his system (*Incoming*, Issue 74). He also helped me choose and set up my audio system about five years ago when I had the luxury of converting a redundant double garage into a 6x7m AV room. I like to think that I put a lot of thought into getting good results... but want to report a recent journey of improvement. The problem I have is that I'm not in any way a hi-fi buff or audiophile - I like music, especially classical, and have pretty good ears - but I don't have the detailed vocabulary to describe differences between things I hear, and have a terrible memory so end up 'in the moment' listening to what I have rather than being able to compare it in detail to what went before. Suffice to say that the account that follows will be rather more basic than the details you usually get in your magazine!

My starting point was as follows; the big floorstanding Wharfedale Opus 3 speakers, with unbranded internet silver cables (from Seduction Audio), with bass and mid biwired from a Cyrus XPower, linked by an unbranded interconnect from the pre-out of a Cyrus 8 integrated whose integrated amp powered the treble... sounds an odd biamp arrangement but is

an upgrade route Cyrus suggest. I'd a Cyrus CD8x with another Seduction Audio interconnect to the 8 integrated, and PSX-R power supply on the integrated, and CD and integrated sat on the middle glass shelf of a Stands Unique stand, the CDx on Nordost points... and I thought it all sounded pretty good.

I was aware of a certain brightness on the treble, and thought that the big speakers lost some of the punch and definition that Giles got from his little standmounts... and read his article, and came to the Audio Show, and got chatting... so went home to play. The play was greatly aided by the loan of some Vertex AQ kit by Jeremy Baldwin of The Right Note, who had also interviewed me in some detail whilst deciding what I should try and made some insightful suggestions.

The first step comes with a confession... I had limited stand space, and had not expected to end up with 4 Cyrus boxes... so the XPower had ended up on the stone floor behind the stand, with the PSX sitting on top... 20 minutes in the garage produced a crude solid wooden shelf onto which went the Xpower and PSX next to each other... with an immediate improvement in overall clarity.

Jeremy suggested that the Nordost points might be taking some vibrations away from the CD into the glass shelf, but that they'd then have nowhere to go so still influence things. The old standby of halved squash balls sounded a bit better immediately - again just cleaner - but little Sorbothane pads under both CD and Integrated made a much bigger difference (sadly I couldn't fit the big Vertex Super Kinbalu platform on my shelf!).

The idea that biamping in the way I had might introduce phase or timing differences led me to hook up the old brass bars between mid and treble and lose completely the integrated amp from the setup, just using the preamp into a biwired XPower... and (perhaps to the surprise of Cyrus) there was a huge improvement in the tautness and immediacy of the music. The lack of definition turned out NOT to be the speakers...

After all these changes I was perhaps a little punch drunk and will need rather longer to be able to notice more subtle improvements; although I can notice the difference made by some Vertex components, I can't pin them down enough to appreciate them (unlike Giles who can literally tell what I change with his eyes closed!).

After yet more listening we concluded that I had a system that had a far wider soundstage and yet was now able to deliver small-scale music (such as Diana Krall) much more faithfully. Giles was troubled by a slight boominess in the bass (not cured well by socks in the ports!), and divorce would be on the cards if I lift the speakers right out into the room, but even moving them forward just over an inch tightened things audibly again.

I'm now in that happy phase of hunting through my CD (and vinyl) collection listening to all sorts of music thinking 'wonder how that will sound now', and smiling a lot. Which all goes to prove that the basics matter, even to a relatively casual ear; keep the soundpath simple, keep vibrations down

and components separated, experiment with placement... and for no more than the cost of a few squash-balls and an old pair of Sorbothane insoles I've roughly doubled my listening pleasure.

Keep the good advice coming!

**Dave Tooth**

*Thanks for the write-up. It's good to get a wide range of components to see if these changes work in all kinds of systems and at all kinds of price points. Keep 'em coming!*

*On another topic, I really should have bought shares in the company that makes Sorbothane. After all, no matter how bad it gets, you can bet that's the one company that will spring back into shape - Ed*

### **There's no fool like an audiophool**

Audiophool reviewers are a bunch of filthy liars and Audiophools are idiots. You type up crap like cables that cost as much as a car. Nobody buys your crap any more except audiophools and they are all too old and stupid to know any better. I've tested expensive cables and they make no difference, so I know you are just con men. Give up, or the next time you cross the road, don't bother looking.

**Via anonymous email (unsurprisingly)**

*Thanks for the kind words. I hope that we can continue to be of service in giving you a useful outlet for your frustrations. Who knows? If we knew where you come from, perhaps some of us old audiophools could rock up on our Zimmer frames and convert you to the cause, if we can club together to buy you enough rope cable - Ed +*



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Triangle Color Bookshelf speaker

by Alan Sircom

**W**hat is it with France at the moment? If there's a technological innovation in audio, if there's something new and funky... or just a damn fine loudspeaker, it seems to come from a French brand these days.

Take the new Color range from loudspeaker specialist Triangle. On the face of it, this is a sub-miniature speaker (smaller than a standmount, larger than a satellite) designed specifically to appeal to a new generation or proto-audiophiles, without compromising what is needed to make a good sound. So, it's a good, rigid box with a rear port, with two fine, front-firing drive units and a choice of rich piano gloss finishes – none of which are wood-effect veneers, so this is a bold departure, because loudspeakers are often conservative.

What's needed to make a loudspeaker appeal to a generation used to getting their music from i-Products? The

speakers need to be small and cute – check. They need to be efficient – check. They need to be fun – check, and rechecked. They also need to be free from the ephemera associated with modern audiophilia – no bi-wiring or finicky sensitivity toward stand, position or cabling. Check once more.

In fairness, the Color bookshelf speaker – called, appropriately enough the Color Bookshelf loudspeaker – is the smaller of two hi-fi/home cinema loudspeakers, the larger being the three way floorstander (guess what that one's called?) and a similarly eponymous and Americanised centre channel. The 'Color' bit comes from the loudspeaker cabinet being finished in a shiny plastic coat of red, white or black (with yellow waiting in

the wings... and perhaps more to follow). You get a choice of black or white grille for the bass driver in the box, which hangs on via magnets so nothing breaks up the elegant lines. No vivid pinks or vibrant blues (as yet), but the three-strong plus one colour scheme has caught the attention of many.

The Bookshelf monitor is tiny (just 29cm tall), rear ported and single-wired. There's a slight chamfer around the front baffle, which gives the loudspeaker an even thinner look from the front. It's efficient (a claimed 90dB, with a relatively tame six-ohm load that never drops below a four and a half ohm minimum impedance). It has a 25mm titanium dome tweeter coupled to a 160mm doped paper cone woofer (both Triangle designs). Like most Triangle speakers, they have crossover points deliberately outside of the all-important midrange, in order to keep things like voices sounding clean and articulate.

*“They are small enough to be almost a point source and an easy enough load to be driven by anything.”*

In audiophile terms, the Color weigh almost nothing, struggle to reach much below 80Hz and are the sort of small-fry speaker that could be ignored out of hand as being just another rear-channel loudspeaker for a home cinema system. Which would be a crying shame because the Colors are a hidden gem, if anything this red can be ‘hidden’.

Why? Because they are small enough to be almost a point source, and an easy enough load to be driven by anything from a tiny valve amp up to something meaty (Triangle claims 50W power handling, and 100W peaks). They love lightweight stands and the acrylic Quadraspire QX were a perfect partner, even though they cost as much as the speakers and the bottom of the Color is too small for the stands in their normal north-south-east-west arrangement, without some plastic poking out of the bottom of the speaker.

Like most Triangle loudspeakers, they sound there best after a couple of days of semi-vicious tweeter abuse. There's no need to thrash the speakers to within an inch of their speaker sockets, but after a day or two of music played at relatively meaty levels, the tweeter stops making its presence felt and settles into a very tasty groove. Don't play this down; it's a dramatic transformation that takes place over those first few hours of listening. Listening to Nick Drake's *Five Leaves Left*, the tone of his guitar sounded more like a new out of the box Taylor for the first couple of days before filling out and becoming the old Guild he used throughout. The shrill, edgy sound of these speakers when played

cold audibly improves with each successive disc for the first few days. After a loud session with AC/DC after a couple of days it changed radically and stayed changed – for the better – throughout the listening test.

After that running in period, the first thing you notice about the Color is its sublime stereo, which is that point source effect in action. The Color's big thing is not image width, but excellent image depth. It presents a soundstage that projects itself into the room well, but also gives an impression of music being performed behind and even above the loudspeakers. Although not as clear or as refined as an electrostatic design, this expansive, deep soundstage is something more commonly found on tall panels rather than little red boxes.

Also like many Triangle loudspeakers, this is a speaker that concentrates on getting the midrange right first. And with the Color speaker, this makes for some of the most distinct vocal articulation at its price point. A two-way loudspeaker generally has a directness and energy that's hard to match, ▶



*“In a way, it’s best doing the audiophile unthinkable; acting as the ‘2’ in a 2.1 channel system.”*

▶ but a three-way loudspeaker often has a more natural midrange and therefore a more realistic sound because it has a driver dedicated to the task. The Color speakers fall somewhere between the two; the speaker has the speed of a small two-way box (naturally) but a lot of that midrange naturalness of a good three-way. In part, this is because the bass driver here is more a midrange unit with bass duties rather than an outright woofer.

Which leads us to the bass. Bass falls into the ‘surprisingly deep for the box size’, but remains this side of the laws of physics. It can be helped with some rear wall reinforcement, but paradoxically works best at least 30cm from a solid back wall. When positioned thus, it displays deeper bass than you’d expect for a loudspeaker this small. Yes, this is somewhat ‘smoke and mirrors’... the bass appears deep for so small a design, but it’s more a bloom around 80Hz giving the impression of bass depth than any real bass depth. What this means is if you plan on using the Colors to fill a large listening room, or you are the sort of person who wants to clearly define the difference between bass guitars and bassists in your music, or you have a desire to hear Leftfield and King Tubby played on 64’ organ pipes, you will need a larger loudspeaker.

In absolute terms, this reinforced bass lightness comes across as making the left hand of a piano sound tonally different to the right, when listening to Brendel play Beethoven’s Pathétique. But this is ‘old school’ thinking, suggesting that bigger is better and a larger speaker is a workable proposition; for many people who will end up with the Color speaker, a bigger loudspeaker simply will not make the cut because they are big and old fashioned looking. And, under such constraints, I’d rather have a loudspeaker that does what the Color does so well and lose what the Color doesn’t do instead of a botched attempt at a full-range speaker.

Bass depth aside, one of the few places the Color shows its relatively low-cost colours is in the refinement stakes. Open, honest and exciting it may be, but if you

are looking for a loudspeaker that could out-smooth a Sonus Faber in an Armani suit, the Color ain’t it. Still, what you get instead for your money is a big, fundamentally right sound from a very small box.

In a way, it’s best doing the audiophile unthinkable; acting as the ‘2’ in a 2.1 channel system. Out in free space, with a suitably fast subwoofer filling in the blanks below 100Hz, the Color makes an incredible amount of sense. It’s so open and natural sounding in such a context, you could even set aside the hi-fi buff’s reservations toward subwoofers and enjoy the balance. It’s not that daft a concept; in many respects the worst possible place to locate bass in the room is the same place as the mids and top and with a mid and top this elegant, the bass needs to be in the right place. Of course, finding a sub capable of keeping up might not be easy – certainly an aging REL sub was not up to the task, when the task started to play some in the groove *Dixie Chicken* by Little Feat. Here, the bass line seemed almost a semiquaver behind the beat. ▶





[sometimes]  
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Alan Sircom, HIFI+ magazine



True music lovers have long admired VTL amplifiers for outstanding performance and lasting value. Incorporating modern features (such as precision-regulated power supplies, auto-biasing, comprehensive fault sensing and remote control) whilst providing both the dynamic realism and tonal purity that can only come from an elegantly designed valve amplifier, VTL stands tall amongst its peers with this unique approach. Intelligent design ensures that convenience never compromises sound quality; VTL amplifiers simplify where it matters - short, pure signal paths and user-friendly, intuitive ergonomics. The result? Truly superlative equipment that is simply a joy to own.



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117 step differential volume control  
Full RS232 control, programmable  
input offsets, HT pass-through  
Luxurious precision machined cosmetics  
Fully featured aluminium remote



▶ What is surprising about these loudspeakers is they can really take an upgrade or two without complaint. These are the sort of speakers that might start their life hanging out of the back of something humble, maybe even an old second-hand receiver from the 1970s, and move up the scale without sounding out of place. They sounded great with the Peachtree iDecco, the Naim UnitiQute and with the Chord Chordette system (coming soon), too... and these sorts of 'tomorrow' systems would make a lot of sense as a complete package. But, if you go up a notch and start messing round with good tube amps or solid-state integrations and pre/power systems, the sound steps up a gear to match. Silly results ensue when placed in the hands of a reviewer, and the speakers quickly ended up being an order of magnitude cheaper than everything else in the system – you know you are bent out of shape when the cables cost 20x more than the speakers.

*“It’s not without its compromises, but those compromises are musically benign and the midrange on up are extremely convincing.”*

Lunacy aside, I suspect the majority of Color speakers will end up on the end of good one-box systems. And that’s where the speakers really shine – they are a great upgrade for those with the better class of one-box system from Cambridge Audio, Denon and Onkyo, giving someone who has hitherto heard the sound of such systems with the giveaway speaker boxes they come with.

It may sound funny coming from a magazine that also features a pair of power amps costing well into six figures in the same issue, but there’s a bit of a value-for-money issue here. It’s a tough call to spank down a monkey on a pair of speakers this small (for those not London born and bred, a ‘monkey’ is – incomprehensibly - £500, and this has absolutely nothing to do with any other kind of monkey spanking). There are bigger loudspeakers, some of which do more, for less money. But what you tend to get with cheaper, bigger loudspeakers is more of the fireworks and less of the music. I suspect that concern about size vs. value is purely an audiophile conceit; those who simply want a bloody good pair of small loudspeakers will love these speakers for the sound they make.

Hi-fi magazines are often criticised for their myopia; we make the assumption that everyone has a Swiss bank account and a room the size of Lichtenstein to house their equipment. It’s relatively easy to pick out the über-system you could live with, but we frequently overlook the other end of the scale... instead of the system with the mostest, what’s the least system you could still use, comfortably? And that’s where the Triangle Color comes in; it’s the physically smallest speaker (this side of a second mortgage) I could happily listen to and still gain a lot of enjoyment from. Put this with a small valve

amplifier and the end result will be a little red slice of musical heaven from 100Hz on up.

There are two schools of thought when it comes to making a small speaker. The first is to try to make it sound like a big speaker and end up making something inconsistent, but initially impressive. The other way is to make the best small speaker you can, and that’s what the Color does so well. It’s not without compromise, but those compromises are musically benign and the midrange on up are extremely convincing and enjoyable. What it does with voices especially makes it an attractive prospect and if it’s reaching out to a new generation of music-lovers, they are getting something to love. The Color speakers have ‘the future’ written all over them. In shiny red. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Two-way reflex standmount loudspeaker

**HF Driver:** 25mm titanium dome

**LF driver:** 160mm doped paper cone

**Sensitivity:** 90 dB/2.83V/1m

**Bandwidth:** 80 Hz – 24 kHz (+/- 3 dB)

**Power handling:** 50W

**Repetitive peak power:** 100W

**nominal impedance:** six ohms

**minimum impedance:** 4.5 ohms

**frequency roll-off - bass:** 400Hz

**frequency roll-off - treble:** 3kHz

**dimensions (HxWxD):** 29x16.5x24cm

**weight:** 4.5kg

**Price** £500 per pair

**Manufactured by** Triangle

**URL:** [www.triangle-fr.com](http://www.triangle-fr.com)

**Tel:** +33 (0)3 23 75 38 20



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Storm Audio V35 Vertigo Integrated Amplifier

by Roy Gregory

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a decent hi-fi system. What is admitted less often, is that the more complex that system, (and *ipso facto*) the more expensive it is, the less likely it is to succeed – or even work. That might seem like a strange proposition, coming from someone who spends considerable amounts of his valuable time reviewing items of almost impossibly exotic hi-fi, but in support of my argument I deploy Pearson's First Law Of Audio, an equally universal truth that states that, "If it works first time, then it isn't High-End!" And let's face it; if anybody is in a position to know, then it's certainly Harry Pearson.

Which is one way of explaining the enduring appeal of the super-integrated amplifier – the one-box solution that promises to do it all on a fraction of the budget, while occupying a fraction of the domestic real estate. Of course, it's not hard to understand the attraction of just such a beast as an almost obligatory step on the notional upgrade path to audio nirvana, a mid-term examination en route to full pre/power graduation. But try using the same logic to explain just why so many fully committed (and heavily invested) audiophiles are throwing in their multi-box amplifiers, replete with multiple power supplies and "down grading" to integrated solutions like the Devialet digital amp. The truth is, that in many cases, the apparently backward step gains more on the swings of simplicity than it loses on the roundabouts of extra power and inter-stage isolation. Far from being a downgrade, a well-designed integrated, operating within its comfort zone, can offer a more musically coherent performance than a mismatched pre/power hooked up with a mish-mash of

mix and match cabling. Done right, the one-box solution can (and all too often does) trump the multi-box set-up done badly. The result is more elegant, more cost-effective and sounds better; what's not to like?

The genesis of the super-integrated really got going with the introduction of the Audiolab 8000, although its DNA reaches further back to the Lentek. Unlike those budget giant-killers, the Rotel 820B and Mission Cyrus 1, the Audiolab threatened to match the load tolerance of then current pre-power offerings, undermining one of their major claims to sonic superiority. Its substantial casework and even more substantial power supply were the foundation on which an audio dynasty were built, but its true legacy lies in the subsequently unbroken line of super-integrated amps vying for our attention. Of course, the advent of CD and resulting marginalisation of the phono-stage did no harm, further undermining the arguments in support of dedicated, standalone pre-amps, so that looking back, we can see audiophile illuminati as august as Krell, Levinson and Audio Research all attempting to hitch themselves to the tailboard of this fast-moving bandwagon. But the really stellar offerings have always

arrived, unheralded and winging in from somewhere out in left field – which more often than not, means France.

The latest contender in the super-integrated stakes has duly arrived from exactly that direction. The (less than catchily named) Storm Audio V35 Vertigo is a predictably prosaic black box, hailing from Laval, located roughly half way between Rennes and Le Mans. The casework is deep, pays some attention to styling and sports the obligatory two control knobs, all that are permitted by the minimalist dictates of the modernist audiophile aesthetic. It's also reassuringly heavy, even in the case of the V35; it's bigger brother offers more elaborate, machined casework and even more mass, but that's another, rather more expensive story.

So far, so very ordinary. Indeed, there's little to visually separate the V35 from any number of other contenders, past or present. One thing's for certain, it definitely lacks the bling factor (and price tag) of current audiophile darling, the Devialet. But look around the back and you discover its secret weapon,

*“A rotary control that allows the user to impedance match the amplifier's output stage to the speakers being used.”*

its claim to fame, its USP... for here lurks (and I kid you not) the Storm Focus control. All the really successful super-integrateds have had something to set them apart, whether it is load tolerance (Audiolab), name recognition (Krell and Levinson), quirky looks (the recently resurgent Adyton) or quirky technology (Lavardin). Storm Force have pinned their hopes on the aforementioned Storm Focus, a rotary control that allows the user to impedance match the amplifier's output stage to the speakers being used, something that should offer significant sonic benefits if the theoretical advantages can be realized in practice, not least because it will allow the system to make the most of the V35's fairly modest 70 Watt output.

More conventional facilities are provided in the shape of five single-ended line inputs, a record out, pre-amp out and power amp input (the bigger V55 offers a balanced input option and 170 Watts per channel). There is an optional phono input that can be ordered for MM or MC cartridges, and fitted internally to replace one of the line inputs. Either version costs £150, although no specifics were supplied. Speaker connections are via single pairs of shrouded five-way binding posts. And that is all she wrote – apart from a surprisingly reasonable price ticket of £2,000.

Hooking up the V35 is simplicity itself; I ran it between the Wadia 861 and a variety of speakers, including (the sublime) Heco Statements and (the ridiculous) Focal Stella Utopia EMs. Greater (electrical) resistance was provided by the Sonics Amerigo and Magneplanar MG1.6 in an attempt to push the Storm Audio amplifier outside of its comfort zone, the mid-80s efficiency of the Maggies simply serving to demonstrate that 70 watts is, and always will be, 70 Watts.

Which brings us to the Storm Focus control. Faced with legendary power-sponges like the Magneplanars, speakers that need Watts like a human-being needs oxygen, the V35 was (unsurprisingly) incapable of achieving anything like realistic orchestral levels. But, keeping the volume reasonable and rotating the Storm Focus control towards the four ohm setting wrought an astonishing change in performance. Whereas previously, the system had struggled to generate both bandwidth and dynamics, sounding thin and pinched, adjusting the rear-panel rotary knob injected a sense of easy flow and rhythmic security to proceedings. Bass went deeper and quicker, the treble gained more space and air, but most importantly of all everything fell into line, bringing a welcome sense of life and poise to proceedings. No, it didn't have me reaching for a recently arrived Ma Vlast, but the angular precision and musical symmetry of Julia Fischer's Bach Concertos, ▶





▶ recording for Decca, was another matter, the technical perfection of her playing and the instrumental interplay with Alexander Sitkovetsky (in the BWV 1043 double concerto) springing to life, the clarity and lightness of touch allowing the violins to sparkle whilst still maintaining the proper balance with, and centre of gravity from, the Academy Of St Martin. While the Storm Audio/Magneplanar pairing is not a combination I'd ever recommend, the amplifier's ability to rise above the challenge of the situation and bring musical structure and order to proceedings served as a salutary indicator of its capabilities. After all, if you can't bring structure to Bach, why bother with anything else?

Moving to rather more forgiving partners allowed the V35 to show its true colours – and the extent of the Storm Focus control's impact, because

*“If the goal of hi-fi is to breathe life into recorded performances, then the V35 is definitely a resounding success.”*

it's impossible to separate the two. In fact, being able to dial the amplifier in to match the speakers in use actually removes one of the biggest variables in amplifier performance, meaning that the sound of a properly adjusted V35 is remarkably consistent. But please note the caveat; in this instance “proper adjustment” of the Storm Focus control is critical to achieving the best results.

So, hooking the V35 up to your speakers, what should you expect? The Storm Focus amp should reward you with a lively, open and agile sound that is quick, clean and energetic. It delivers a broad, open soundstage with excellent depth and air for an amp at this price. It also does a better than expected job with instrumental separation and texture. But what really sets the V35 apart from the crowd is its ability to bind all these aspects together into a musically convincing and engaging whole. If the goal of hi-fi is to breathe life into recorded performances, then the Storm Audio V35 is definitely a resounding success – helped in no small part by the Storm Focus facility. And therein lies the rub, because as impressively effective as the Storm Focus control undoubtedly is when properly adjusted, it does raise the twin spectres of misuse and abuse.

Take a look at said control and you'll see that it runs through 270 degrees, with a range from zero to 16 Ohms. You should

set it (at least initially) to match the nominal impedance of your speakers. You then fine-tune it by ear, which is actually a lot simpler than it sounds. Bearing in mind that you need to reset the control each time you change speakers (or cables) I've had quite a lot of practice. I'm sure that there's more than one technique, but the one I settled on runs as follows: play a piece of reasonably energetic violin or acoustic guitar and gently adjust the control, first one way and then the other. What you are listening for is an increased level of musical energy and sense of purpose in the performance. If the setting is too high, then the sound starts to get pinched, thin and dry; if it is too low then it gets soft, soggy and indistinct. But when it's right the sound locks in, with a sense of both body and drive that brings the music to life. That's because as well as adjusting the output impedance of the amp, the control also tweaks the global feedback – no wonder you can hear the effect.

Which brings us back to the question of misuse and abuse. Of the two, misuse is the easiest to deal with. If you can't hear what the Storm Focus control does (meaning that you won't be able to adjust it correctly) do not buy this amplifier: Be honest and be sensible. Besides which, if you can't hear Storm Focus at work you've probably already spent too much on hi-fi. More worrying is the potential for abuse, the temptation to use the control to “tune” the system to taste. This totally misses



11



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**KEF**  
INNOVATORS IN SOUND

► the point. Storm Focus is not a “little bit warmer, little bit drier” sliding scale, nothing but a glorified tone control. There is one, correct setting in any given system; anything else and you’ll be short-changing your system, your self and your music. Think of it more like an adjustable version of the output taps on a valve amp. You set it once, set it right and then forget it – unless you change the system. The good news is that shouldn’t be hard to do, as you’ll be spending all your time listening.

Hooked up to either the Hecos or the Stellas, the V35 was an engagingly vivacious performer, easily belying its modest cost, even in this exalted company. The sense of life and energy that comes from precise trimming of the Storm Focus control imbues the musical performance with a sense of verve and purpose. It also brings that all-important (and illusive) sense of human agency to proceedings – assuming of course, that it was captured in the original recording. So, it’s no surprise to find an infectious immediacy in the likes of Michelle Shocked or Stewboss. You hear it in the measured, fuzz-power chords that drive ‘Fill Station’, you hear it more clearly still in the plaintive lament of ‘Wanted A Girl’, especially the fragile delicacy and layered complexity of that track’s opening bars. But you hear it just as clearly in the driven electronica of the Pet Shop Boys. ‘It’s A Sin’ is unashamedly dance music – but it’s also beautifully and intelligently crafted dance music, that played with tempo and ramped dynamics long before the rave culture or trance. The V35 doesn’t just drive the track along, it unravels the complex layers and textures, drawing you in, leading you into ill-advised little flurries of dance steps and shamelessly egging you on to further advance the volume control.

The sheer enthusiasm that the V35 is capable of bringing to its musical reproduction shouldn’t be mistaken for a lack of poise or precision. Yes, it does the PRAT thing with aplomb, but it’s almost as an after thought, a natural result of the amplifier’s innate sense of place and order, clarity and separation. So it doesn’t just sort out the multi-layered density of ‘It’s A Sin’, it gets each beat and each wash of synth sound precisely in the right place. Likewise, the deft bass melody that so subtly underpins ‘Wanted A Girl’ is both tactile and clear of pitch and pace, holding the track and anchoring its more ethereal elements. That’s why each track brings its own, very different musical and emotional power to the party. Is there a price to pay for the pleasure? Inevitably – and here it’s extracted in the shape of a subtle leanness, a slight coolness to the tonal balance. For me, that’s a small price to pay. In fact, in the vast majority of systems and with most speakers the V35 is likely to be paired with, it’s a more than likely to be a positive attribute. What worries me more is that it might tempt users to attempt to “warm” the sound with the Storm Focus facility. Don’t do it. It won’t work and all you will do is destroy the very qualities of musical communication and organisation that make the V35 special in the first place. This amp is all about a place for everything and everything in its place and that sense of order will be the first casualty of ill-considered adjustment.

Can the Storm Audio V35 become the latest incumbent of the Super Integrated throne? Well, it has all the credentials, both conceptually and sonically speaking, and at £2,000 it constitutes a price/performance bargain of heroic proportions. Should we all be selling off our expensive pre-power set ups and downsizing? One track back on the Connoisseur/Berning combination and you realize that there are no free lunches in the world of audio. Which is not

to say that the V35 isn’t capable of embarrassing many an expensive, multi-box amplifier, especially one that’s not sitting too comfortably in its system context. Big amps will always beat it for power at the bandwidth extremes, but that’s exactly where they can also get into trouble – and exactly where the V35’s musical coherence really hits home. Cool, classy and seamlessly energetic right across its range, the Storm Audio V35 is more than equipped to both engage and seduce. Only time will tell whether its talents will be matched by its popularity, but any shortfall won’t be for want of trying. In this instance it’s very much a case of, “new name, same old story” – in the best possible way. Those looking for more music should go looking for Storm Audio’s V35; it may be the new kid on the block, but I’ve a sneaking suspicion it’s going to become a familiar face. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Solid-state integrated amplifier

**Inputs:** 5x single-ended, line level  
Optional MM or MC stage

**Input Impedance:** 25 kOhms

**Outputs:** Pre-amp output  
Record output

**Rated Output Power:** 70 Watts/8 Ohms

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 440 x 80 x 410mm

**Weight:** 13kg

**Price:** £2,000

**UK Distributor**

Kog Audio

**Tel:** +44 (0)2477 220650

**URL:** [www.kogaudio.com](http://www.kogaudio.com)

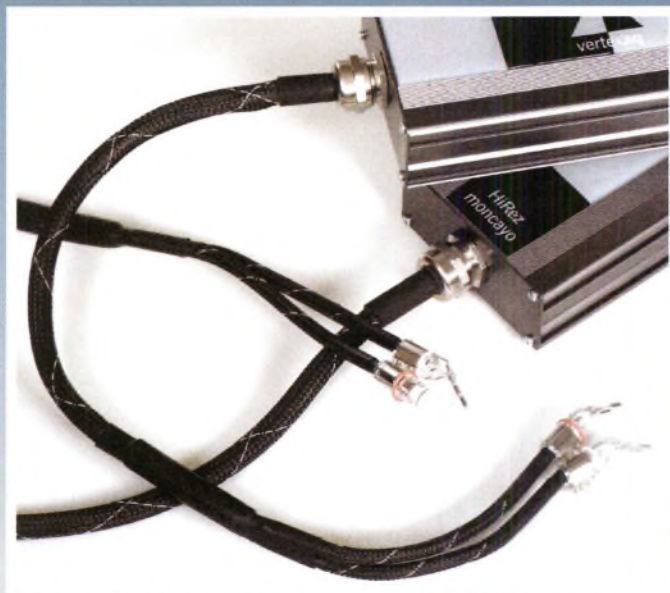
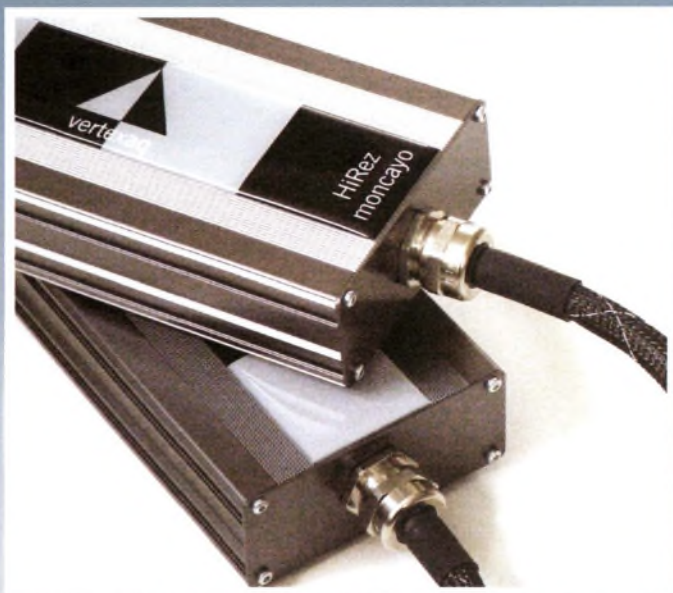
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# Introducing the HiRez Moncayo Speaker Lead from Vertex AQ



As with all our HiRez products, there is a lot more going on with this cable than might first be apparent. Yes there are 6 solid-core silver conductors per channel, with Teflon insulation. And yes they are fitted with WBT's finest solid-silver connectors. But this is only the start.

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Conventional speaker leads (plus the internal wiring in the speakers) can act like huge radio aerials, picking up RF noise and injecting it back into your system. But the RFI/EMI absorption soaks up most of that RF energy, resulting in a massive drop in unwanted noise that would otherwise be polluting your system.

Also there is the high level of vibration to consider - which can pass back from the speakers and cause very high levels of microphonic distortion in the electronics of your system. The advanced acoustic absorption within the modules drastically reduces this effect.

At this point though, perhaps we should warn you of 2 things. Firstly, these cables are far from cheap. The design effort, plus the materials and man hours that go into hand building each pair, is considerable. Secondly, the sound quality improvement they bring to a system is simply staggering - and they are addictive! You have to remember with this product that taking the musical signal from one end to the other is only one element of the solution, the reduction of those other faults between speaker and amp is frankly essential in our view if you want to achieve the highest levels of replay fidelity.

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# Vertexaq



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Marten Heritage Getz loudspeaker

by Neil Gader

**T**he Marten Getz loudspeaker is a three-way dynamic-driver floorstander. Its debut marks the completion of the four-model Heritage Series from the company that hails from the land of ABBA, Volvo, and Ingrid Bergman.

Marten, known for bestowing the names of famous jazz icons on its products, positions the Getz between the larger Bird and smaller Miles 3. At 116cm tall, the Getz time-aligns its drivers with a gentle, backward leaning rake and is finished in a mirror-like piano black. Contrasting sharply against the gleaming baffle is the array of crisp, white, inverted-dome drivers—a combination that gives the Marten a white-tie look, as if it's preparing to take the stage at Carnegie. The transducers are sourced from Germany's Accuton and they will likely be familiar to Kharma and Lumen White devotees. They employ ceramic membranes formed from aluminium oxides. (Note that they bear absolutely no relation to fine china, porcelain, or anything else one might find on the dining room table!) These diaphragms are as thin as a human hair, featherlight and unencumbered by dust caps or phase plugs. They are known for extremely high rigidity and are as fragile as eggshells. Unlike typical cone diaphragms, they will not deform when subjected to an errant finger touch; they will shatter. Hence the wire-mesh covers protecting them, which obviate the need for a grille cloth. The midrange drivers add resonance damping via laser-drilled holes in the ceramic cone. Introduced for the Getz is a new 230mm aluminium passive radiator that Marten considers a satisfying middle ground between the tuned, open port of a bass reflex enclosure and the fully sealed enclosure of an acoustic suspension design.

The crossover is second-order (12dB/octave slopes at 400Hz and 2.9kHz), built from premium components that include Teflon-ring-core coils (for bigger values than 3.0mH), polypropylene capacitors from Mcap and MIT, and non-inductive resistors from Mundorf. Sensitivity is 87dB with a nominal impedance of six ohms but dropping no lower than four ohms. Internal wiring is Jorma Design throughout. Twin pairs of high-quality WBT binding posts are standard.

Cabinet construction was flawless to the hand and the eye. Built of specially selected, 23mm thick, veneered MDF, the enclosure has heavily braced non-parallel sides that make it all but immune to a knuckle-rap resonance test. The supplied pointed footers are mounted on heavy brackets that extend

beyond the side panels of the speaker, giving the Getz a wider more stable stance.

I began my listening evaluations using high-powered solid-state amplification. It was impressive in all the predictable ways—superb low bass slam and control, rock-solid dynamics. But the treble also sounded a bit constrained. However, Marten's U.S. distributor Dan Meinwald suggested I hear the Getz driven with tube amplification and made the superb EAR 834 integrated amp available. Meinwald obviously knows a thing or two about his products. Not overly powerful at 50Wpc, the EAR nonetheless drove the Martens well in my smallish room. Clearly the Marten Getz favours tubes or at least Tim de Paravicini tubes. The speaker loosened up and played more freely when driven by the EAR 864, and there was more bloom and air than with the solid-state amps I had on hand.

Sonically the Getz actually startled me at times. But not in the way its looming piano-black countenance might imply. Yes, it had loads of output, but there are plenty of other loudspeakers of this specification that can out-slam it in bass extension or macro dynamics, if that's your goal. The Getz, in my view, has a different set of priorities. And early on it became clear that paramount on that list is a midrange purity, pace, speed, and transparency. The Getz plainly relishes the smaller gestures that reside deep in a recording. The tip off for me came early on when I cued up the title track to Linda ▶

▶ Ronstadt's *Simple Dreams* [Asylum]. Those familiar with the tune know it's a quiet, contemplative song—so intimate that I tend to turn the volume down and sink into the moment. Even so, newly minted low-level details kept vying for my attention. I could hear the soft rising whoosh of the analog board faders coming up in front of incoming tracks. I could also make out the rightward flare of the reverb off the Ronstadt vocal. Switching to Rutter's *Requiem* I could single out and follow the timbres and distinctive vibratos of each singer in the chorus. The Getz permitted me to hear just a little deeper into the mix during Lyle Lovett and Ricki Lee Jones' vocal duet of 'North Dakota.' Examples like these underscored the fabulous inner life of a recording—moments bubbling up with the micro-dynamic and transient spontaneity of the live musical encounter. It's the kind of resolution manifested in a large-format photographic image, where you can come closer and closer to the image without encountering any resolution-inhibiting grain.

*'And amidst all this low-level resolution, the Getz never forgets the importance of rendering a nicely scaled soundstage.'*

The Getz's savvy inner game also reveals timbral distinctions, so that each snap of a snare drum or rim shot becomes utterly distinct from the previous strike. Musical cues, especially pure acoustic ones like the timbre of the talking drums during Jennifer Warnes' "Way Down Deep," reveal a complex combination of spring and skin that is utterly convincing. And amidst all this low-level resolution, the Getz never forgets the importance of rendering a nicely scaled soundstage. Instruments are well focused and stable in their positions. Orchestral layering was very good. The Getz reproduces the ephemera of a venue's reverberant acoustic like few speakers I've encountered. One of the LPs that brought this home to me was Ricki Lee Jones' *Pop Pop*, in the stunning two-disc ORG reissue. This is an album that seems purposefully designed to be played back aboard the Getz. During "I'll Be Seeing You," the spatial relationships between the clarinet, standup bass, nylon string guitar, and vocalist are eerie in their authenticity. This was also about as accurate as sound as I've ever heard from a recorded classical guitar. Depth retrieval didn't quite extend to the extreme back of the hall like the almost supernatural Jamo 909—a bipolar speaker—but was noteworthy nonetheless.

The overall character of the Getz is a cooler and drier one, somewhat consistent with my experience with ceramic drivers. Consistent, too, is the speaker's speed, detail, and coherence. It doesn't reveal any spurious box resonances. Tonally the presence range emerges with just a shade of added forwardness which lightly outlines the edges of images, violin for example. With drivers of lesser quality this might have been more of an issue, but the Getz inverted tweeter never sacrifices its intrinsic sweetness and bloom for "manufactured" details.



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▶ There is to my ear a narrow dip in upper-bass energy that enables the vivid midrange and treble octaves to come forward a step—a choice that sharpens articulation. Speaker placement—a little more backwall reinforcement, in particular—does ameliorate some of this effect (as it did in my room), but with a baritone vocalist like Sinatra singing ‘Angel Eyes’ from *Only The Lonely*, there’s a little less weight and chest resonance on each note. On orchestral recordings, the slight attenuation of dynamic thrust in the ‘power’ range validates my view that Marten sought this specific voicing—not an unflattering one, but one more weighted towards finesse and midrange fluency.

*“I haven’t had this much fun hanging out with a couple of Swedes since Mama Mia! opened.”*

In overall bass response, the Marten performed vigorously in my room down to a rock-stable 40Hz with plenty of useable energy below that. The speaker was also striking for its consistent sense of pace and coherence as the music dropped into the bass region. When I listened to ‘1A’ performed by the trio of cellist Yo-Yo Ma, bassist Edgar Meyer, and fiddle player Mark O’Connor, there was no driver discontinuity or isolation—an anomaly that’s easy to hear with this disc. Speaking of which, the musicianship on this CD is a kaleidoscope of soaring high-speed manoeuvres and bravura techniques, like a musical relay race with the baton getting passed every so often. What is especially instructive to listen for are the timbral and resonant differences that occur as the players play solo and together. On this track Edgar Meyer draws a heavy bow across the lowest notes of his acoustic bass and the result is a wonderfully rich, growling image that should tickle the soles of your feet. The Marten did well to preserve this, although I still felt the transition to the bottom string of the acoustic bass lacked some of the full resonant energy.

The passive radiator deserves credit for control and a distinct lack of localization artefacts, but that’s not to say it is completely invisible. Bass quality tends to be a personal issue that is often shaped by your favourite musical genres. Given the Marten’s price ranges and physical specs, I felt comparisons to the acoustic-suspension Magico V2 and the ported TAD CR-1 were appropriate. In that company I felt the Marten was strongly competitive, offering a boatload of refinement and pitch control. But there was also a hint of overdamping that subdued the heaviest dynamics. Ultimately, for explosiveness on a triumphant scale (if that’s your thing), the Magico or TAD has more weapons.

Transient response and mid-to-upper frequency dynamics are uniformly excellent, but the Getz’s pace is even better—a quickness and responsiveness akin to the fast-twitch muscle fibres of a gifted athlete. Acoustic guitars, harpsichord, high-hat rhythm-marking, cymbal crashes, basically any instrument where the transient report is sharply encountered simply materialize

in and around the Getz with definitive clarity. Ceramic drivers are noted for this quick-launch trait, but equal credit is owed to the cabinet. It doesn’t soak up transient speed and micro-information. The Getz has shed enclosure artefacts to the extent that images materialize in the vicinity of the cabinet as if the box itself were a mere afterthought—existing only to suspend the sound at an accurate level, like a stage to support actors and allow them to be seen by the audience.

The Marten Getz is a musical and communicative loudspeaker, not without its own accent, but persuasive in the manner it conveys intimacy, pace, and transparency—in other words, the lifeblood of the music. It’s a solid contender deserving a special place on every audiophile’s short list. I haven’t had this much fun hanging out with a couple of Swedes since *Mama Mia!* opened. +

*First published in TAS issue 208.*

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Three-way passive radiator

**Drive units:** 230mm ceramic, 230mm aluminium (passive), 177mm ceramic, 25mm ceramic

**Frequency range:** 30Hz–40kHz +3dB

**Sensitivity:** 87dB/2.83V

**Impedance:** 6 ohm

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 25 x 116 x 34.5cm

**Weight:** 33kg per loudspeaker

**Price:** £13,950 per pair

**Manufactured by:** Marten

**URL:** [www.marten.se](http://www.marten.se)

**Distributed by:** Angelsound Audio

**URL:** [www.angelsound.co.uk](http://www.angelsound.co.uk)

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Brian Dramkroger - Stereophile - June 2010

**Audience adeptResponse aR8**

Hi-Fi Plus Power Product of the year 2010

"makes you play more music at a single sitting"

"the level of improvement in most cases was good enough to make you draw breath"

"No product is perfect, but the aR8 gets damn close. It's strange; if a change this large is laid at the door of a CD player, preamp or power amp, few quibble. Even saying changing the interconnect cables produces this big a difference might be accepted with scant question, but to attribute these sort of improvements to a power product is always viewed quizzically. The fact remains that the Audience adeptResponse aR8 makes a big, important difference to the sound, every bit in line with three grand upgrades to electronics further up the food chain. So, set aside your preconceptions and prejudices and listen."



**The Power for the Glory**

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You need to supply the components in the system and this can be achieved using mains blocks like the Qbase6 from Quantum QRT or via a multi way conditioner like the award winning aR8 from Audience which is 8 way as well as the 4 way aR4. If you have gone this far then do not skimp on the power cords or the fuse replacements. We stock all these products and use them ourselves as they are the best at what they do, and only the best will do.

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# DarTZeel NHB-458 monoblocks

by Alan Sircom

**S**ometimes a product just demands a large gasp. The NHB-458 is once such product, the weight, the physical size, the finish, the power on tap... and the price tag are all gaspworthy.

In a way, the NHB-458 is a sign of just how good the first DarTZeel product – the NHB-108 stereo power amp – really is. This 100 watt stereo chassis is one of the best amplifiers you can buy. To improve upon it is not easy – simply making bridged mono versions of the NHB-108 doesn't cut it – it would potentially improve upon the stereo chassis, but not provide the same jump in performance the 108 has above its peers. To make an amplifier that was demonstrably better than the NHB-108 without losing something in the process was the motivation behind the NHB-458 monos. And it goes some way to explain just

why these things cost so much; it's not two NHB-108s, it's more like the exponential of the power amp.

The first thing you notice about the NHB-458 is their sheer physicality. The chassis itself is not much larger than an Apple Mac Pro or similar tower computer. Except it weighs as much as a truck load of Apple Macs and is made out of solid aluminium billets that take 150 hours to machine before sent for some of the richest anodizing around. The distinctive gold and red colour scheme used in other DarTZeel products gets its full expression here, and it looks more elegant in the flesh ▶



▶ than it might first appear. Two smoked glass side panels show off what's going on inside the amp.

In fact, like the NHB-108, what's going on inside the amp is deceptively simple. No contacts, no switches and just a single gas-filled relay per side. No negative feedback in either input or output stages and only three junctions in the signal path from input to input. As you might expect from so expensive an amplifier, it involves a lot of astoundingly expensive components and incredible amounts of power reserve, and a custom-made toroidal transformer about the size of a car tyre. Which is why the amplifier weighs so much, and why a notionally 450 watt per channel amplifier tops out at something closer to 1.4kW at full tilt.

The exciting thing about a pair of power amplifiers built to such a high specification – and at such a high price – is it immediately side-steps all the normal limitations and considerations about context. Someone spending the equivalent of the price of an entry-level Cessna on a pair of power amplifiers is not going to be limited in their choice of source component, preamp, loudspeakers, room, room acoustic treatment, stands, tables and cables. This is always going to be partnered with the very best, so discussions of compatibility seem at best pointless. Nevertheless, there's a natural partner in the DarTZeel NHB-18NS preamplifier and Zeel connections. The rest is expected to be of a similarly high calibre.

Suitably partnered, the experience is a remarkable one. Although its capable of playing the sort of nice, safe music usually heard at hi-fi shows, it's hardly a test for an amplifier this capable; the NHB-458 is the kind of amplifier that's wasted on simple music and can take anything you throw at it.

That being said, at first you should handle with care; not because it's fragile, but because this kind of dynamic range is not usually found in audio equipment and you might suffer because of it. This is the audio equivalent of a classic Lamborghini Countach. Hit the throttle (or in this case, the 'pleasure control') and remember to buckle up. Waaaaarrrrroaaaaarrrrrrggggghhhhh! This isn't just a dynamic-sounding amp, it's a dynamic amplifier with a super-charger, nitrous oxide injection, twin warp engines and it's own particle accelerator. All those years with CERN being built under the Alps patently rubbed off on the Swiss, and this is the sort of amp that can go from a fraction of a watt to picking loudspeaker drivers out of the wall in an eyeblink.

And like an old Lambo, this unlimited power at your fingertips comes with responsibility demands upon the listener. As it warms up, it's twitchy

before it is responsive. But even when it's at full throat, you need to handle with care; there's no single happy place volume level, you need to fine-tune each record or you'll overload. That's not the speaker or the room overloading, and it's certainly not the amp, but you. You can't take the information overload.

This is perhaps an example of how audio should be. Each recording has its own level and if you like to play these at something approaching real-world levels in the listening room, you have to act like a bit of a safecracker at the controls. Yet, for all that endless dynamic range and ability to go from mild to wild and back again as fast as the music played, it's not just about dynamic range. It's a surprisingly subtle amplifier for something that vast. ▶



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employing high-speed, low-loss Micro **Mono-Filament** construction in these critical applications. The result is a unified family of products that can be built into a coherent cable loom that's finally capable of releasing the scale and drama, the sheer musical power captured in your recordings. Visit your nearest Nordost dealer and you'll discover that It's never been easier – or more affordable – to realize the full potential of your system. It's never been easier – or more affordable – to bring music back to life.

**Leif by name,  
Life by nature.**

**NORDOST**  
MAKING THE CONNECTION

- ▶ Vast, and fast. It's virtually psychic. Transients like rim-shots appear with a directness and impact that makes almost everything else sound like it's got a 'thing' against drum kits. Yet the amps are some of the most sweet and relaxing amps around. And for all that, it's not the sort of psychotic sound that tries to be all things to all people, and ends being nothing for anyone.

What the DarTZeel goes for is the musical enjoyment and entertainment first and foremost, and it does that through the dynamic freedom of having almost instant, almost total power. Playing 'Goodbye Pork Pie Hat' on *Mingus Ah Um*, you get to hear this in the way the sax is there, living and breathing in front of you. It will bring out the majesty in music, even if that majesty is not easy to find.

There's a lot of the sound of the original DarTZeel stereo power amp here, just with seemingly endless power. The speed, the harmonic richness, the sound of an amp getting out of the way were all functions of the original stereo. They are just here in full effect; where the stereo chassis hits its functional limits of dynamic headroom, sheer driving power for big speakers and big rooms and stereo separation, is where the monos begin to let their hair down.

*"This is the Bruce Lee of amps; light on its feet, but capable of kicking you through a door. You don't just listen, you hang on"*

We are all children of the soundbyte today. Everything needs to be pinned down in a pithy sentence, no matter how much that trivializes matters. The DarTZeel soundbyte works, though – it's a flea-powered amplifier that brought a really big friend along. This has all the romance, dynamic freedom and sparkle of a three-watt triode design coupled with the sort of effortless power delivery you might expect from a kilowatt design. From a sonic perspective alone, this is the Bruce Lee of amps; light on its feet, but capable of kicking you through a door. You don't just listen, you hang on. It's a rush, it's a hell of a ride!

Let's 'man up'. There's no getting away from that price; can any power amplifier, no matter how good, be worth more than a top Porsche Panamera Turbo with all the trimmings? In some respects, the question is an invalid one – you aren't going to splash out six figures on an amp without having a heck of a lot of wealth behind you. If you want the most majestic sounding, most romantic, most musically beguiling sound yet produced, but with lightning quick reflexes and the sort of dynamic range that will leave most speakers feeling like they went ten rounds with a before-the-griller George Foreman, this is the place. And if you have the folding to make the price question irrelevant, you'll buy it. And I envy you, for owning something that passed fleeting through my fingers (except weighing as much as the amps do, they wouldn't pass through fingers, they'd tear a few off in the plummet to the ground).

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Power Output:** 450 watts into 8 ohms; 600 watts on peak program music 720 watts under 4 ohms; 1,200 watts on peak program music

**Inputs:** phono (single-ended), XLR, Zeel No global negative feedback

No feedback at input  
Full open loop output stage  
Constant propagation time from 2 Hz to 200 kHz  
Phase rotation less than 1 degree from 20Hz to 20kHz

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 65 x 82 x 31 cm  
**Weight:** 67.5kg each

**Price:** £135,000 per pair

**Manufactured by:**

DarTZeel

**URL:** [www.dartzeel.com](http://www.dartzeel.com)


**Distributed by:**

Absolute Sounds

**Tel:** +44(0)20 8971 3909

**URL:** [www.absolutesounds.com](http://www.absolutesounds.com)

In all bar my wildest fantasies (OK, not those fantasies; the printable ones), there's no way I could ever dream of even thinking about affording this product, even if I could sprinkle the most special reviewer magic keen-pricing dust over the NHB-458. But if I could, I would. The rare handful of incredibly well-heeled audiophiles who can afford this masterpiece will be buying a true audio legend. I'm jealous. I really am. +



*"If you want to make someone feel emotion, you have to make them let go. Listening to something is an act of surrender."*

**Brian Eno**

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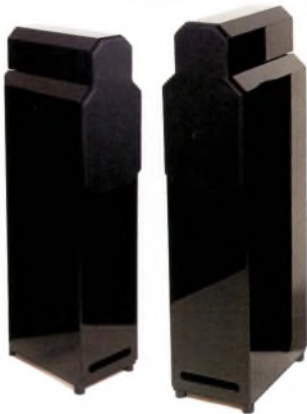
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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Naim UnitiQute

by Alan Sircom

**D**o you remember the Naim Nait? Not the latest thin-flat Nait, but the original Nait... a cut-down, relatively low-powered little box that sang its heart out whenever connected to quality partners. In some respects, the UnitiQute is the Nait for the 2010s, current Nait amplifiers notwithstanding. In other respects, this is the Swiss Army Knife of audio, except that Salisbury isn't in Switzerland.

I have to admit something of an internal about-face with the name. My first reaction was UnitiQute was a terrible handle, and thought it sounded like some kind of pet-grooming product, rather than the ultimate audio client box. Then I broke the tape on the packaging, got the thing out and... well, it's *quite* cute. Matt black and green displays are not normally considered the stuff of cuteness, but there's something disarming about the UnitiQute that gets it over the first hurdle – it seems to pass muster without having to negotiate with 'The War Department'.

In the most basic terms, the Naim UnitiQute is a 30W per channel integrated amplifier with DAB/FM tuner, a line-

level input or two, a headphone socket, speaker terminals, a 24bit/192kHz DAC and a bunch of next-gen computer connections. Products like the UnitiQute are driving fundamental change in audio, even down to the terminology used to classify such things. Stop thinking about the Qute as a DAC or an amp or even a receiver; it's a 'pull' UPnP media renderer and access point, with built in tuner and (able to be disabled) amplifier. In other words, it retrieves sound files and digital streamed music from network-connected devices, handles the data conversion and allows the user to control all of this from its own remote handset (alongside the tuner and amp bits), using a standard Universal Plug 'n' Play protocol that most things computery can understand. The remote in the box is smart in and of itself, capable of almost at once being the ultimate controller ▶

▶ for the technosavvy grandmaster or a simple device for the technophobic grandmother. That said, if you are using the remote alone to navigate through a huge collection of tracks, it can get infuriating.

Speaking of remotes... I think Naim has scored something of an own goal by charging nigh on £25 for its n-Stream iPod/iPad app. I get the logic of paying for it (if the Naim apps were free, they will invariably get a one-star review from someone with the IQ of a houseplant who tries and fails to get it to control their Buzz Lightyear action figure), Apple doesn't allow 'special-offer' apps on its store and the app is so good it boosts the functionality of the Qute. And that's the point; if the app is good enough to drive Naim-loving Applephobes to buy iPads because of what it does for the Qute, I am not quite quite sure it should be a pay-for upgrade.

*“The (n-Stream) app is good enough to drive Naim-loving Applephobes to buy iPads because of what it does for the Qute.”*

The reason for concentrating on the remote handsets is that's the only way you get to drive the Qute. There's not much to play with on the Qute box, not even a conventional volume knob; instead, the logo itself also acts as a combined volume control and mute button. This takes some re-learning from those well-versed in the ways of hi-fi, but does work well. However, most people faced with a box with no controls on it get flustered.

The UnitiQute hangs off the end of a home network, ideally with a server, computer or NAS box storing all your music (you can also use the UnitiServe... more on that in a later issue). This system can be wired or wireless, although Naim recommends use of a wired connection wherever possible. This also allows streamed internet radio stations (through vTuner's five-star service), and can even control and play music off USB hard drives and thumbdrives. It's easier to rattle off the list of digital formats that aren't compatible than the ones that are. Apple Lossless and anything beyond 24/96 WAV (via USB)... that's it. In fact, it even supports Apple Lossless files, just so long as they come from an iPod, not via a computer. OK, so that's a pretty substantial omission given the dirty great iTunes elephant in many people's rooms, however Mac users can use the EyeConnect UPnP streamer that transcodes Apple Lossless to WAV on the fly – problem solved!

There's an obvious comparison between Naim's system and the Linn approach to computer audio replay. At face value, the two are very similar,

but Naim's version of plug 'n' play lives up to the term, where Linn's is more convoluted. Sound quality aside (I feel the Linn is slightly superior, but I didn't have the two network devices running side by side to compare closely) if you are building a system without the aid of a safety net – such as a dealer with a black belt in the art of Net-Do – the Naim system will work without reconfiguring TwonkyMedia databases.

In use, I can see why Naim recommends a wired connection, because the UnitiQute 802.11g wireless kung fu is not strong, and cannot stream 24/96. Yet, it's a measure of just how good the UnitiQute acquires itself in the sound department that this grumble quickly melts away. More importantly, it's here where the old Nait begins to poke its green and black little head out. The Qute is so sonorous, engaging and entertaining, you just can't help loving what it does. The 30W rating (45W into four ohms) belies a surprisingly powerful little beast; it won't drive everything but is exceptionally comfortable powering the sort of speakers you'd normally partner a Nait with – Focals, Neats, smaller Sonus Fabers, Spondors (the A9s were a fine ▶





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- ▶ – if unexpected – fight-above-its-weight choice), Totems, Viennas and so on. I also used it with the excellent Triangle Colors, the Amphion Argon3 and even – briefly – the Kiso HB-1 for the ultimate in ‘mullet’ systems. Each time, the UnitiQute gave a great account of itself.

It’s almost a cliché to discuss Naim and timing, but the simple truth is there is something about the UnitiQute that temporally hangs together better than many other similar devices. It’s not a rhythmic urgency, but an order and accent on getting the beat right that is so very attractive to so many people. This doesn’t just hold on Nirvana or ZZ Top records, you even get the sense of rhythmic flow that set Rosalyn Tureck apart from her peers when playing Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier. This mono recording from the mid-50s is all about the metre of the pieces and a less rhythmically-savvy system would leave it sounding nothing special. In fact, the UnitiQute makes a case for a rediscovery of the importance of tempo in music in the computer age, because it seems easy for computer audio systems to focus on the expansiveness of the sound at the expense of its internal timing.

*“The thing about the Qute is it does so much so easily, you quickly come to expect the same everywhere.”*

The rest of the presentation is no slouch, either. The Qute is dynamic and insightful enough to take full advantage of the best FLAC files without masking their importance, but not so overtly dynamic as to make a hash of less than perfect low-grade MP3. It’s coherent, especially at low levels (it has a level-compensating bass output option), articulate and detailed and – while it doesn’t make a strong play at throwing out a wide or deep soundstage – it images a lot better than the ‘big mono’ sound of classic ‘chrome bumper’ Naim gear. Including the classic Nait. In short, it makes computer music just as much fun as the Nait did to vinyl two and a bit decades ago.

Naim traditionally provides an upgrade path for its users, by means of external power supplies, bigger better power amps and so on. The UnitiQute is even more direct than that... you just buy more UnitiQutes. How it works is like this; perhaps you have a Naim Uniti as the main system and you want to share the love and give someone else in the family access to the same goodies the Uniti has in microcosm. Out comes the UnitiQute, and sits in the family room. Pretty soon, another appears in a bedroom. Or two. Then the kitchen gets Quted. Pretty soon, you are finding ways to run power and comms cables down to the garden shed.

The thing about the Qute is it does so much so easily, you quickly come to expect the same everywhere. In other words, the UnitiQute will make you demand more UnitiQutes. It doesn’t need to do this for functionality or upgrade potentials; you will be the one driving the inevitable rise of the UnitiQute. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Naim UnitiQute network player

**Audio Inputs:** 3.5mm front-panel socket, line-level stereo RCA input at rear

**Antenna Inputs:** Wi-Fi, F type, (plus PAL adapter)

**Digital Inputs:** 5 S/PDIF (2 optical, 2 coaxial/BNC 75Ω (plus RCA adapter), 1 digital/analogue 3.5mm jack)

**USB Input:** front-panel socket

**Other Inputs:** Ethernet and iPod (digital via USB socket), RS232

**Audio Outputs:** Speaker output, preamp output (RCA), headphone

**Tuning Range:** FM 87.5 - 108Mhz DAB Band III and L Band

**Signal/Noise ratio:** 80dB

**Power output:** 45W per channel into 4Ω, 30W per channel in 8Ω

**Audio Formats Supported:** Internet radio (Windows Media-formatted content, MP3 Streams, MMS), Playlists (M3U, PLS), MP3, AAC (up to 320kBit/s, CBR/VBR), Windows Media-formatted content-9 (up to 320kBit/s), FLAC and WAV (up to 24bit/96kHz via UPnp and USB only), OGG Vorbis

**iRadio Service Provider:** vTuner 5' full service

**Languages:** English, German, Italian, French, Spanish, Chinese, Dutch

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 20.7x8.7x31.4cm

**Weight:** 5.6Kg

**Price:** £1,350

**Manufactured by:** Naim Audio Ltd

**URL:** www.naimaudio.com

**Tel:** +44(0)1722 426600



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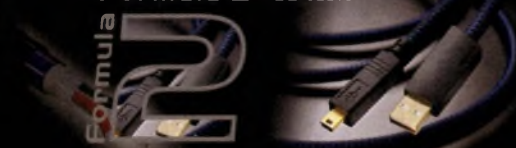
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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Spendor A9 floorstanding loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

**S**ome reviews almost write themselves. Tannoys are fun, Wilsons sound big and Spendor... well, Spendor comes from the 'pipe and slippers' end of the market. Job done, who needs to open the box? Unfortunately, loudspeakers like the A9 make the reviewer's life that bit more complex, because they don't adhere to our perceived opinion about Spendor loudspeakers. No pipes. No slippers... just a really good, honest loudspeaker.

The A9 is a slim three-way floorstander, with the two 180mm Kevlar composite cones with long-throw motors acting together, coupled with a 150mm midrange cone made from Spendor's own transparent ep38 polymer, and a 29mm fabric dome tweeter. The low and midrange units are Spendor's own designs, while the tweeter is outsourced, but built to exacting specs. It has to be; Spendor was one of the main protagonists of pair matching from its early days and these components need to be exact enough to allow a 1dB matching across the board. Irrespective of the pair matching requirement, the A9's tweeter has a deliberately irregular-shaped surround that it calls its 'bi-elliptical acoustic lens technology'; funky name aside, this does help improve horizontal dispersion and off-axis performance without messing up (or being messed up by) the midrange that sits below.

*"Spendor was one of the main protagonists of pair matching from its early days."*

The loudspeaker is somewhere between the thin-walled cabinet of old and a thicker-walled more modern design, and sports 'dynamic damping' at key points to reduce potential for the cabinet to sing along with the music. Cleverly, Spendor manages to kill several birds with one stone in the base-plate, as it combines the mounting bracket for the crossover, a rigid braced plate that can really grip a M8 spike or four and the base of the letterbox shaped 'linear flow' rear port. A single set of WBT terminals seal the deal.

It's all extremely elegantly finished and, though tall, doesn't look out of place. We are used to oversized base-plates to help lower the centre of gravity and this speaker looks a little odd without such a plate, but it's certainly adding to the clean lines of the design.

What the A9 does so well is to combine that BBC-speaker neutrality (only this time without a little upper-mid peak to make music sound just a shade 'better' than it really is) with a more



▶ exciting and dynamic presentation that modern audio demands. That's a tough balancing act; those who like their loudspeakers soft and 70s think modern speakers scream and squeak at them, while those more used to modern designs think those classic BBC models dull and flat-sounding. The A9 sails between these two waypoints beautifully.

This makes it a speaker for all seasons. I don't subscribe to the 'good for classical' or 'rock-ready' design schools, because a loudspeaker ought to be genre-agnostic. However, as the philosopher David Hume pointed out, there is a significant difference between the descriptive (what is) and the prescriptive (what ought to be), and in audio that means few loudspeakers are truly comfortable with everything from Palestrina to Pantera. The A9 is one of the exceptions. Its tonal balance and dynamic range benefit a huge range of musical styles and I threw everything from Bach's Mass in B Minor to Evil Nine at the speakers and they did well with every track.

The dynamic range was especially impressive, in that context. It is possible to make everything sound 'good' by slugging the dynamic range of the speaker. This results in a sense of being removed from the music; sounds happen around the loudspeakers across the room and your connection to the music is cerebral in nature. On the A9 however, the scale of the music snaps at your attention gland and you are in there with the music. Perhaps not in the 'red in tooth and claw' nature of some loudspeakers, but the A9 certainly makes a good balance between head and heart. This came across well with the Amadeus Quartet's rendition of Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden' string quartet, combining as the does the detail and imagery needed

to make a string quartet sound 'realistic' with the dynamic range and energy that makes you understand why they played the music in the first place. The same thing happens in reverse with ZZ Top's *Tres Hombres* album; you need that dynamic range to get the swampy groove across, but the fine detail and articulation mean you also understand what a track like 'La Grange' is all about.

If you come away from the last two paragraphs with the word 'balance', well done. Now add the word 'bass'. The A9 has quite a lot of it; not in a dubstep, wall-of-bass, gut-mangling onslaught way, but controlled,

*“The A9 is one of the exceptions. Its tonal balance and dynamic range benefit a huge range of musical styles.”*

deep and precise manner. It's perhaps best geared for typical UK/EU rooms and might get a touch lost in a barn of a listening space, but under such circumstances the A9 will deliver a surprising amount of bottom end heft from what is a comparatively small package. OK, perhaps not enough to hit those 'end of the pedalboard' organ notes, but also not enough to swamp a typical UK room. So, perhaps 'balance' is appropriate here, too.

As you might expect given the Spendor heritage, detail and imaging are first rate. In bringing the Spendor sound into the second decade of the 21st Century, there was a risk that these important aspects of Spendor sound would be underrepresented, but fortunately this is something of a win-win. The A9 doesn't have its own hologram projector, but the image is wide of the boxes, and has good front-to-back stage depth. It doesn't bulldoze walls down, or give an artificially large soundstage, instead portraying a sound that is appropriate for the instruments or singer on the recording. Similarly, the level of detail is fine enough to pull hidden glories out of those grooves or digits, but not at the expense of a pinched, etched or tippy sound quality.

An interesting detail about the A9 is its port. This is one of the least 'porty' sounding speakers around and the speaker sounds





almost as fast as a sealed enclosure, but without the concomitant sensitivity, impedance or bass-lightness issues such a box might bring. It's also rear firing but not room fussy, which further suggests the port is doing more to ease the loudspeaker load than acting as sonic reinforcement. This seriously helps make the case for the A9 with the speed metal merchants, because there's almost no bass lag blurring beats.

It would be a dereliction of duty not to find flaw in a product, but I admit to having something of a struggle on my hands here. The loudspeaker has a relatively low ceiling; it will play loud, but perhaps not loud enough for real headbangers, and at pain-levels it can harden up and sound shouty in the mids and beyond. At the other extreme, it does fairly well at low levels, but at whisper quiet moments, there is a slight loss of integration between the drivers. But this feels 'picky' to me; the sound is simply excellent under the conditions most people will use these speakers for most of their time.

A few issues back, I waxed lyrical about the Magico Q5. Sadly, not everyone has the amplifier girth, the room width or length or the wallet depth to cope with so demanding a £65,000 loudspeaker. What happens for the rest of us? The Spondor A9 happens. It gives you a lot of that Q5 sound for nigh on 1/13th the cost, and doesn't need a powerhouse amp or a stateroom to hold court. OK, if you were comparing the two side-by-side in the sort of environment that gives both an equal footing, you would quickly know why the extra money was justified (especially if you like to play loud and like your bass full-range) and where it had been deservedly spent. The point is, however, is not to criticise the Spondor for not being a £65,000 loudspeaker, but to highlight just how good you the A9 really is. Up against one of the high-end's latest big boys, the A9 really is the plucky little loudspeaker that could.

Sometimes as a reviewer, you happen across a product that ticks all the boxes and yet you have no qualms about giving it back at the end of the review period. The Spondor A9 is not that kind of product. It ticks all the boxes, yes, but also presents music with a charm and poise that is rare in audio of any price. That stays with you. I would imagine that in 20 years time, when all the shiny 'must have' loudspeakers of 2010 are long forgotten, there will still be a lot of people happily playing music through their Spondor A9s. That might just make it the best investment in audio around today; not just in future resale values, but because these are the sort of loudspeakers that get handed down from father to son. That's how good they are. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Description:** 3-way floorstanding loudspeaker

**Enclosure type:** Spondor linearc flow reflex

**HF drive unit:** 29mm wide-surround dome with fluid cooling

**MF drive unit:** Spondor 150mm ep38 cone

**LF drive units:** Spondor 180mm Kevlar® composite cone

**Sensitivity:** 90dB for 1 watt at 1 metre

**Crossover point:** 500 Hz and 5.0 kHz

**Frequency response:** 50 Hz to 20 kHz ± 3dB anechoic

**Typical in-room response:** -6dB at 28 Hz anechoic

**Impedance:** 8 ohms nominal

**Impedance minimum:** 6.2 ohms

**Power handling:** 250 watts unclipped programme

**Terminals:** WBT 4 way binding posts single-wired

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 103 x 20.5 x 36cm

**Weight:** 27kg each

**Finish:** black ash, cherry, light oak, wenge

**Price:** £3,995 per pair

**Manufactured by** Spondor Audio Systems Ltd

**URL:** [www.spondoraudio.com](http://www.spondoraudio.com)

**Tel:** +44(0) 1323 843474



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Burmester Top Line 100 Phono Preamp

by Alan Sircom

Let's start at the end. The Top Line 100 from Burmester is not so much a hi-fi component as a phono laboratory. It's the vinyl archivist's dream; a method of extracting the signal from a cartridge with unparalleled accuracy and allowing that signal to pass either to an amplifier or a recorder – digital or analogue. In essence, it's a professional transcription product with luxury chrome front panel.

This is an expensive product, but having played with many expensive pieces of audio equipment, this one stands out for its exceptional build quality. There is a tendency in audio to assume that the quality of build is inversely proportional to the elegance of the front panel; a mirrored finish front panel should therefore be hiding a mediocre phono stage and a so-so build quality. Nothing could be further from the truth with the Burmester.

It's hard to express this in print, because you can't physically pick up and feel the weight of a photograph, but the product is built with the sort of solidity that exudes confidence. That means not inconsiderable bulk and some hard edges, but it also means a product built to last. Open the product up and it's like an electronics engineer's fantasy in there, right down to its carbon-fibre resonance-reducing feet. Nothing ostentatious, no components made out of Star Trek materials, just the sort of build that makes you think you could swing the 100 round by its resistors if you were so inclined.

That shiny front panel with toggle switches and LEDs and even a VU meter is what makes this a phono laboratory. The 100 accepts two phono inputs, one MM and one MC, in balanced mode (the output of a cartridge is balanced and Burmester supplies a set of silver SME arm-plug to XLR cables

– which I used with my SME 10 – and a set of phono-XLR adaptors). Toggling through the options, gives you 36 different combination of load and gain for both MM and MC cartridge designs. Amazingly, the different inputs go through their own independent passive RIAA equalisation stages and each has its own by-passable subsonic filter. The selection of phono section follows, passing immediately to an 'auto adjust' control.

This is the innovation that really lofts the 100 into the top league of phono stages. Cartridges are remarkable transducers, but transducers are prone to the sort of inaccuracies that would be unacceptable if you were pulling digits off a shiny disc, especially when it comes to channel imbalances. These might not be large, but ▶



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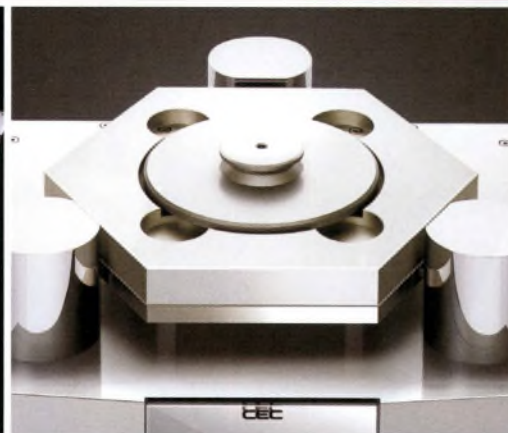


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▶ an half-decibel difference between the output of left and right channels are potentially possible and these imbalances are perceptible, if not immediately audible (in fact, when it comes to archiving your recordings, they become all the more noticeable when you replay the digital file afterwards, because we are not used to hearing such channel imbalances through digital audio sources). The auto adjust control determines and – as the name suggests – automatically adjusts the left and right channel to within 0.2dB of each other, even if there's a massive 6dB difference between left and right channels. The volume control can be fixed or variable (if you want to use this as a preamp for a turntable only system), with a VU meter to check levels for either left, right or mono, and a set +6dB pad. Phase reversal is also possible, and these stages output to XLR or phono. Burmester 'commons' the balanced and single-ended outputs thanks to its own X-Amp2 amplifier modules.

Here's another departure for Burmester. The 100 features an analogue-to-digital converter, which can run in 48kHz/24bit, 96kHz/24bit or 192kHz/24bit precision. The first – popular among radio and studio folk alike – suggests that a lot of its clientele are intended to be professional power users. Couple this with the gain control and the VU meter – with its fast-twitch overload LED – and you really do have a museum-grade vinyl archival laboratory. The digital output is delivered in coaxial digital, toslink and USB flavours.

There's an inverted snobbery in audio. The hair-shirt logic goes that the less money spent on the looks, the better the product. So, something that looks like a scaled-up tin of tobacco with a Bakelite chicken-head knob from the 1950s is going to sound a lot better than something with a bit of product

design behind it. So, that shiny front panel must cause some consternation among the sack-cloth and ashes brigade, because it's a product that looks elegant and sounds the part too.

Or rather, it doesn't. It doesn't have a sound, that is; it simply transcribes the sound of the replay system with uncanny accuracy. There's nary a cartridge that will trip up the 100 – even the torture-load that is the Ortofon MC7500 and the twitchy-but-excellent Benz SLR Gullwing were given the best possible

*“It doesn't have a sound; it simply transcribes the sound of the replay system with uncanny accuracy.”*

run for their money. Surprisingly though, the biggest change came when playing the CartridgeMan hyper-modified version of a Grado moving iron design. Typically, the relatively high output of a moving iron means it fits snugly into a moving magnet design with no difficulties (nominally 47kΩ and 5mV output), but a quick pass through the MM-options meant the cartridge suddenly sprang out of its shell with a 120pF load (below this, treble began to get fierce and anything over 220pF and the cartridge started to sound 'puffy' and almost muffled) and a 46dB gain gave it the right balance between low noise ▶





▶ and pushing the peaks into distortion. Two things emerged from this; how great a difference these two parameters make in helping to define the audio performance of the cartridge and how close moving iron can get to even really good moving coils when fed through a really good phono stage.

What this brings is a complete absence of background noise, save for that on the record itself. When that record is the 180g pressing of *Heartworm Highways*, that means almost no background noise whatsoever aside from tape hiss. Instead, what you get instead is that sort of spaciousness and unforced, unedited, unprocessed detail that the disc is famous for. However, give the 100 a more complex album like the latest *Band of Horses* album and the phono stage raises its game and copes with dense tracks like 'Compliments' with no problems. And when it comes to digitising the signal into a PC, the ADC is clean and transparent... and happiest at 96kHz sampling.

The 100 is unforgiving, but in a good way. I'm more your 'fit and forget' vinyl guy, rather than the sort who wants to adjust VTA on every record, but the 100 could make me more anal about such things. It's definitely the kind of phono stage that highlights the rewards adjusting VTA on a per-disc basis brings. In fairness, I can see why this clarity and detail might leave some people comparing the vinyl to a top-notch CD player and there's none of that valve-sweetness or heads-down boogie injection found in some phono stages. But if you want accuracy, the 100 does it right.

So there's a downside, but one that only really shows up when comparing the 100 to a select few phono stages. It's a RIAA-only stage, with no provision for other equalisation curves; so no Columbia, Decca FFSS, CCIR 55 or IEC-RIAA, and no DMM. These are not trivial limitations at this level, because there are rivals (AMR, Audio Research, Zanden... even Graham Slee) that do this. It's also not a trivial limitation because it's ultimately what prevents it from being legitimately museum-grade. Outside of the polished marble halls of the museum, it's probably not a deal-breaker, but it's a shame that a device that is such a world-class archival product in all other categories should fall down on this requirement.

Burmester has done a good phono stage before. In the 1980s its 838 phono preamp was near-universally praised for its fine engineering and even finer sound. The 100 echoes that success in both cases, but this time it adds a digitising element for those seeking to archive their vinyl without compromise.

The model 100 joins a very select crowd of phono stages that represent the best there is today. There is a small, but select group of people who suggest the most important part of the phono replay chain is the phono stage (assuming, of course, that deck, arm and cartridge are of sufficiently good stock not to get in the way). The rationale for this is that the phono stage can bring the best out of what goes before it. It's a minority viewpoint, but – having spent some time with the Burmester 100 – one that I can seriously relate to. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Inputs** 2 x balanced Modules (MM or MC) (fully equipped)

**Max. input voltage** MM: 78 mV  
MC: 8.5 mV

**Input amplification** MM: 37dB, 40dB, 43dB, 46dB, 49dB, 52dB  
MC: 57dB, 60dB, 63dB, 66dB, 69dB, 72dB

**Input impedance** MC 33Ω, 75Ω, 220Ω, 390Ω, 1kΩ, 47kΩ

**Input capacitance** MM 68 pF, 120 pF, 180 pF, 220 pF, 300 pF, 400 pF

**Outputs analogue** 1 x balanced, 1 x unbalanced

**Outputs digital** 1 x RCA, 1 x Toslink, 1 x USB

**SNR MC/MM** MM: -84dB (dBA = -88dB)  
MC: -74dB (dBA = -79dB)

**Dimensions (WxHxD)**: 48.2x9.5x34.5cm  
**Weight**: 10kg

**Price**: 10,000€-14,000€ (depending on optional modules)

**Manufactured by** Burmester

**URL**: [www.burmester.de](http://www.burmester.de)

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Karan Acoustics KA I-180 mk2

by Alan Sircom

**T**he Karan integrated amp has a cult following. Milan Karan doesn't change his products on a regular basis, so Karan doesn't get the brand coverage that a more prodigious and profligate revamper might and the company is up against some of the bigger names in the industry with marketing powers to match. And yet, the Karan integrated has become the doyen of those 'in the know', any mention of the product on even the most vituperative forum is met with praise instead of hostility. There are many folk who traded in well-respected Big Brand amps for the Karan... and never looked back. Only Lavardin receives similarly universal reverence and owning one (a Karan or a Lavardin) bestows upon the listener a kind of classy anti-hero chic, akin to ordering an Armagnac when it's brandy time. So a new version of the 180W Karan integrated amp is a must-hear, if only to stay ahead of the game and remain one of hi-fi's fashionistas.

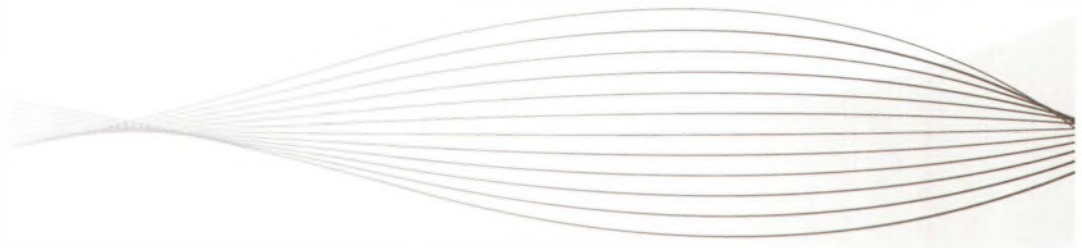
Karan has adopted an 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' approach to the KA I-180, and much of what was good about the original amp is retained. The amplifier is built along differential lines, but drops comfortably down to single-ended operation. It delivers 180watts into eight ohms and 300watts into four, and has a frequency response from DC to light (well, from DC to 300kHz). The rest of the specs are identical, as is much of the amplifier board layout and even the internal geography of the amp. It also has that unique – as in 'how does he do it?' – Class A sound without Class A inefficiency. The secret, apparently, is sliding bias, low current and treating the whole voltage rail like the base of a transistor.

The one specification that has changed begins to give the game away. The new KA I-180 is 10kg heavier than its predecessor. What's changed? A bigger, potted toroidal transformer for starters. This necessitated a re-laying out of the

centre power supply board... and that gave Milan Karan the perfect opportunity to revisit almost everything about the 180, changing and improving where necessary. It's a tribute to how good the initial design was that not a great deal ended up changing.

Where the last few years have changed the face of the audio world is there's now even greater acceptance of the importance of audiophile-grade electronic components in products. In some places, this manifests itself as a burgeoning hot-rod community, whether home-grown or 'bodger built'. In others, it's the dealer or distributor making the changes for consumers. Here, the amp is upgraded at source. Look closely and you'll see audiophile-approved names like Vishay (there are dozens of these premium ▶





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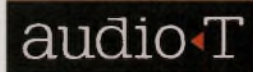
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▶ priced resistors in circuit) and Cardas (in internal wiring, the signal sockets and speaker terminals) in place of the standard fare. This not only adds to the cost of the product, but seriously ups the performance, as we'll see.

The former Karan tone was musical in a very solid-state kind of way. The balance was even-handed and satisfying, with an extremely clean midrange and top end. Little wonder it became one of the darlings of the post-Naim set, because it almost sounded like a 'hyper-Nait' as it had the ability to cast a spotlight on the music being played. This made the old Karan one of the best of the best, but in fairness, its sound was never going to make people hand in their tube-club membership cards.

Not any more. The KA I-180 mk2 retains the musicality of its predecessor, but gives it a sense of harmonic integrity that's normally associated with glowing bottles. It still retains an energy that enticed people looking at life after Naim and those making the transition to proper high quality audio sounds. But the mild sense of 'etched' at the top end has gone away and instead it's got that high-end 'shimmer' to the treble that draws audiophiles to good amplifiers like moths to a flame. That almost makes it the perfect combination.

What I find particularly impressive about the Karan is its temporal precision, and it is not hard to see why it gets praise from Naim users for that reason. It's neither up-beat or down-beat, just correctly with the beat, no matter how convoluted that beat (or this sentence) might be. So, play something with some groove (like *Maggot Brain* by Funkadelic) and it makes you want to drive a tripped-out 70s Lincoln Continental and call people 'blood', but swap that for Josquin and you'll want to don doublet and hose. It's very true to the rhythm when rhythm is all there is. Otherwise, it's also very true to the original source material. However, I can't help feeling some of the Naim folk seeking a new beat would prefer the older, slightly more etched and less free sounding Karan integrated; it's almost that there is too much happening in this new amp for someone just after some simple foot-tapping.

There's a sure-footedness about the Karan sound that is so very appealing. A bit like a mountain goat, but less bleaty. It tracks the music beautifully, with a dynamic insight and instrument separation that is usually found in bigger pre/power designs. That, coupled with the power needed to drive practically everything in UK homes these days, makes you wonder just how much

more a pre/power can deliver. The reality is, of course, 'a lot' if well chosen, but I'd hesitate to find a well-chosen combination at the Karan's price that gets as close to the integrated's overall presentation (the MF A6 series tested last issue gets close, but where the power amp has got the moves to take on the Karan, the pre isn't 'there').

*“It's got that high-end 'shimmer' to the treble that draws audiophiles to good amplifiers like moths to a flame.”*

That sure-footed power has an obvious advantage in the way the Karan presents a solid image. Instruments in the soundstage are rock-solid, and seemingly very physical presences in the room. This doesn't favour any specific musical genre, but is especially noticeable with smaller-scale jazz or folk, in particular music with a singer up front. It really feels like there's someone in the room.

It's dynamic too. One of the acid tests of a really good component is how it takes you unawares. The sound of a system outside of the listening room – where the dynamic range ▶



*“This is no radical shift in performance, because no such shift was needed. It was a good amp; now it’s an even better one.”*

- ▶ and the timbral ‘rightness’ of a system is more important than its soundstaging properties – can sometimes make or break a system. Usually, it must be said, break it. Not here; the sounds out of the room are more like the real thing than usual. Once again, this works better with solo instruments, because the impression of someone playing sax or acoustic guitar in a room is more likely than someone having a whole orchestra in there. Sometimes that sax sounds like a sax, and it does it well here with Eric Dolphy.

This is one of those hard ones to write. There’s always a downside, but this one is very well hidden; hidden well enough that I really can’t find it. It’s got that satisfying directness that Class A brings and the energy you get from Class AB heft, and an absolute lack of background noise. It has a distinct ideal level for each recording, but turning the dial up or down from there is still good. Perhaps the huge Oreo remote control could change channels as well as volume, but really that’s it.

Let’s be strictly honest here. This is no radical shift in performance, because no such shift was needed. It was a good amp; now it’s an even better one. No hype and no hyperbolic adjectives required. Yes there will be factions that prefer the more brightly lit sound of the older design, who will doubtless ignore the Karan’s strengths in every other sector to make a point that it isn’t a Naim amp from the 1980s. Those who retain a sense of balance in their audio systems will see that the changes are better. It doesn’t try to sound ‘valvey’ in the process, but now has universal harmonic appeal.

The audiophile response to “I’ve got a Karan amp” is, apparently, “niiiiice!” Judging by the revamped KA I-180, that response is set to continue. The tone may be a shade sweeter and the front panel option widens its décor options,

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

True differential (balanced) circuit

Inputs: three line inputs (RCA) one balanced line input

Outputs: one RCA line output, speaker terminals

Frequency response: DC - 300kHz +0, -3 dB

S/N ratio: better than -112dB

Damping Factor: better than 1800 at 8 Ohms, 20Hz - 20kHz

RMS Power: 180/300W into 8/4 Ohms

Remote Volume Control

Dimensions (WxHxD): 50 x 9 x 34cm

Net weight: 28kg

Price: £5,995

Manufactured by:

Karan Acoustics

URL: [www.karan-acoustics.com](http://www.karan-acoustics.com)

Worldwide and UK distributor:

Audiofreaks UK

URL: [www.audiofreaks.co.uk](http://www.audiofreaks.co.uk)

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but the fundamental reason why Karan is king remains undimmed. It’s still going to be one of the cult faves; the forum darling and the cognoscenti’s choice. In an audio world where so many products live or die by their brand name and not much else, it’s good to have exceptions like Karan. +





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Alan Sircom, HiFi Plus Issue 48

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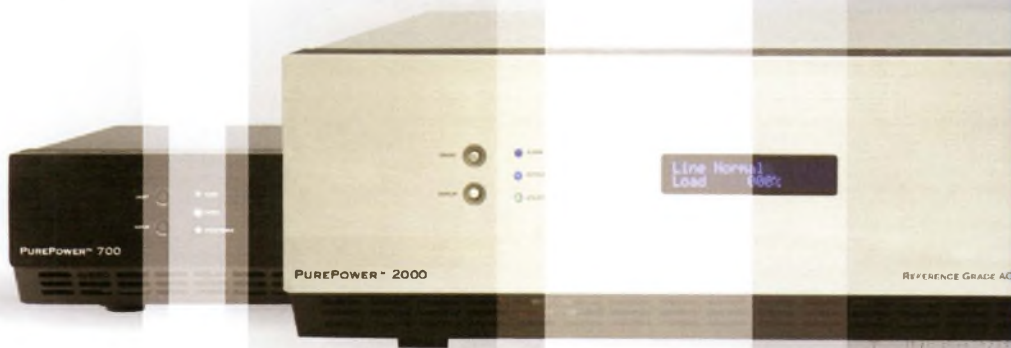
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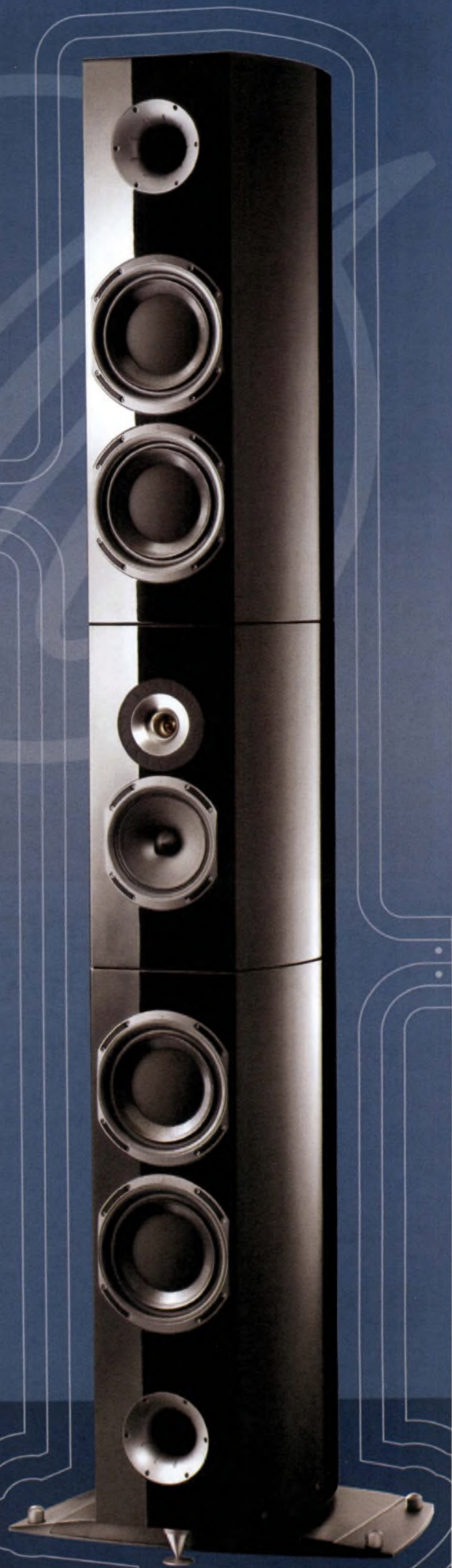
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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Abbingdon Music Research LS-77 standmount loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger



**N**ot before time, the standmounted loudspeaker seems to be undergoing something of a revival. Up until the mid-1980s floorstanding speakers were relative rarities, but over the last two decades they've come to almost completely dominate the scene.

For a time, the serious standmount seemed endangered, but happily that scenario seems to be changing, and speakers like this LS-77 Reference Class Professional Monitor from AMR (Abbingdon Music Research) will add fuel to the flames. At 35kg each and £10,995/pair, this stand-mount is a lot heavier and more costly than the vast majority of floorstanders, implying that AMR must have some pretty good reasons for adopting the format.

AMR is a relatively new kid on the block, agreed. Although development work apparently started back in 2001, the company has only been formally in existence since 2006. It made its first appearance in HiFi+ in early 2008, when Roy Gregory reviewed its flagship CD-77 CD player. Despite understandable initial scepticism over any new company, RG was very impressed by what he found in this very sophisticated and substantial machine, and the brand has also been receiving plenty of plaudits from elsewhere.

Under the direction of designer Thorsten Loesch and CEO Vincent Luke, the company's modus operandum is to design and engineer its components in Britain, source components from everywhere, and then carry out manufacture in China to keep costs and prices under control. Although the UK operation is based in Notting Hill Gate, North London, the name Abbingdon was apparently chosen in tribute to the Mini automobile that the principals consider a design icon. Since Abingdon (spelt with one 'b') was the home of MG, and the Mini was designed at Longbridge near Birmingham, AMR should maybe stick to designing hi-fi, which it seems to do rather well.

The four 'type 77' Reference Series components – a CD-77 CD player, AM-77 integrated amplifier, PH-77 phono stage and this LS-77 loudspeaker – represent the company's current top range. All have massively hefty build and the electronics in particular include some pretty unusual features. Being an essentially passive device at the tail end of the hi-fi chain, there's arguably less opportunity to be creatively different, but that certainly hasn't stopped AMR from trying. While it might be argued that none of its numerous features are entirely original, they're certainly unusual and interesting.

The first (and probably the last) thing I noticed was the massive weight. Not only do the beasts themselves weigh 35kg each, but each also ▶

► comes in its own snug-fitting, very tough flight case, which probably adds a further 20kg or so. (It was just bad luck that the carrier arrived early, when I was still in my dressing gown!)

The main reason for the unusual weight is that the enclosure is fabricated from metal throughout, specifically from a magnesium/aluminium alloy. The carefully shaped front baffle is hewn from a 25mm slab, while the other five panels are a still healthy 10mm thick. The result is exceptionally stiff as well as heavy, ensuring an unusually stable mechanical platform for the driver diaphragms, and vanishingly low cabinet coloration. Though sometimes overlooked, it's worth emphasising the point that by definition the enclosure has a much greater surface area than either of the drive units. Any enclosure movement is effectively a form of distortion that will tend to muddle up the low level information and limit the effective size (or depth) of the dynamic 'window'.

*“The result is exceptionally stiff as well as heavy, ensuring an unusually stable mechanical platform for the drivers.”*

So the enclosure matters a great deal, from a performance as well as an aesthetic perspective, though AMR has certainly not ignored the latter. Available in 'titanium' or 'champagne' finish, the dull all-over sheen gives a very attractive 'hi-tech' appearance, especially as the fit and finish is as good as anything found in high-end electronics.

The advantages of the stand-mount approach is that it approaches a point source ideal much more closely than a floorstander, and (perhaps more significantly) it allows the omnidirectional bass frequencies to be propagated without hindrance in every direction, including beneath the speaker.

This two-way design is not unduly large – the front panel is 25x49cm, just large enough to accommodate the drivers – but it is quite deep and therefore somewhat bigger than most stand-mounts. I'd estimate that the internal volume is around 28 litres, and the rear panel includes a good size port, again in Mg/Al alloy. AMR describes the bass loading as combining the best features of a reflex port and a transmission line, which might or might not be the case. Since both approaches (and indeed tuned column loading) show broadly similar impedance characteristics, the distinction between these allegedly distinct bass loading techniques has long been a topic of debate. However it's actually handled, the impedance trace indicates that the port reinforcement here will be centred around a low 32Hz.

The drivers are both fairly unusual. The main bass/mid driver is a nominal '10-incher', a 240mm frame unit with a wide surround and a 160mm diameter cone/dome diaphragm. The latter, probably moulded plastic, has half a dozen small damping pads arranged around its periphery, just in from the surround, and is driven from a large diameter (100mm) voice coil, which will ensure prodigious power handling capabilities. The motor magnets are mounted within the voice coil.

This driver crosses over to an equally unusual treble unit, using very steep slope (60dB/octave) filters operating at a relatively low 1.6kHz. The

unit is a relatively large isoplanar variation on the ribbon theme. The 120x22mm diaphragm is somewhat recessed, and its sound radiated is modified by two stages of waveguide.

Partly to compensate for different listening distances, and the different radiating behaviour of the 'point source' main driver and 'line source' tweeter, the relative treble level may be adjusted. This is done underneath an inspection hatch in the rear panel by replacing resistors with alternatives supplied, though the factory-set alignment seemed about right for our conditions. Bungs are also supplied to modify the relative bass output, either reducing its Q or blocking the port entirely. Twin terminal pairs are fitted, paralleled with SpeakOn sockets, and an ►

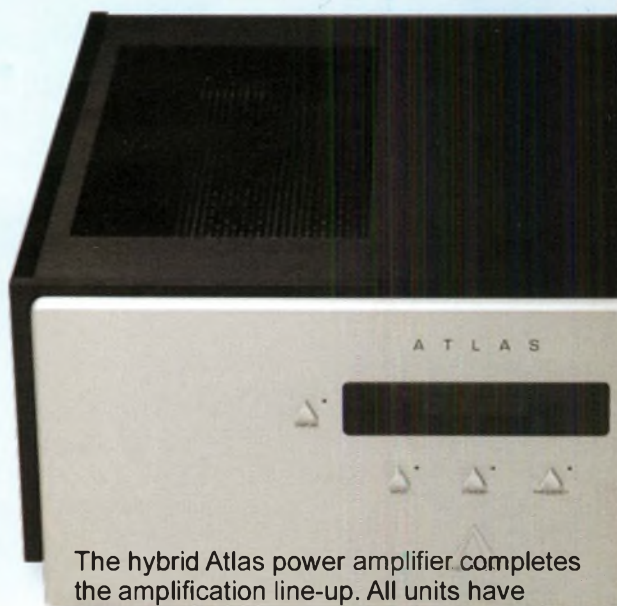


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Little wonder, then, that our customers frequently ask us to distil our experience, curious to know what exactly we fire up in the evening when we want to listen to music.



The hybrid Atlas power amplifier completes the amplification line-up. All units have elegant styling, cool and understated. And at our recent Bath hi-fi show, Jim introduced to the UK his first source component, the Romulus CD player, with a valve output stage. Look for the launch later this year, when reviewers again will struggle with superlatives.



Well, it will come as no surprise to frequent visitors here that Aesthetix electronics often feature in our main system. Designed and manufactured in California, Aesthetix components are based on valve (tube) technology, with microprocessor controls for ultimate configuration capability and remote control convenience. In a market where many competitors strive for high resolution above all else, sometimes painfully so, Jim White, Aesthetix founder and chief designer, manages the rarest of balancing acts: without forgoing any musical detail, he offers tone, tone, and more tone.

The Aesthetix Rhea and Rhea Signature phono stages, often the starting point for our Aesthetix customers, typify the experience. *The Absolute Sound* described the Rhea with three words, "open," "transparent," and "uncoloured", adding that it imparts "a sense of palpability and immediacy that recalls the magic of live music."

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The Model 20/2 weighs approximately 18.2kg and this is especially significant in relation to its size because in meeting the requirements of mass and stiffness it is density that matters, a point that is often overlooked, because sheer size can be impressive!



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The Orpheus features a boron cantilever, newly developed for a natural sound, a low-mass Ogura PA stylus tip, and ultra grade 7N copper coils.

Transfiguration

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- ▶ exceedingly comprehensive, detailed and useful manual is also supplied.

The specification conservatively claims a sensitivity of 87dB – I'd have gone for 88dB. Impedance is rated at 8ohm with a 6ohm minimum, an easy-to-drive impedance characteristic that's comfortably confirmed. Bass extension is impressive, especially by standmount standards: the spec quotes -3dB at 26Hz under IEC room conditions, and this correlates well with my own findings.

My far-field averaged in-room responses were really rather impressive, holding within +/-3dB right across the band above 100Hz (below which room modes dominate). The only significant departure from measured neutrality was a mild upper midband prominence (500Hz-1.3kHz)

Perhaps because the latter is more of a plateau than a peak, it never seemed intrusive, and one was much more – indeed constantly – aware of this speaker's extraordinarily wide dynamic range, and remarkably low enclosure contribution.

The longer I spent listening to this pair of speakers, the more I came to appreciate their virtues, and the more difficult it became to come up with worthwhile criticisms. It might not have the bottom end muscularity of some larger three-way designs, but the bass alignment still worked rather well in my listening room, with the additional dexterity and agility that seems to be an inherent property of a high class stand-mount.

Room modes tend to dominate the output at low frequencies, and also introduce significant 'room gain'. With their ports left open, and the speakers placed on 600mm stands well clear of walls, the two LS-77s gave just a little too much bass output – which is no problem subjectively because the bottom end is crisp and very clean. With the ports blocked completely, and under the same conditions, the bass end is just a shade too dry. With a little care and experiment, it should therefore be easy to adjust the relative bass balance to suit personal taste and conditions.

It's important to sit down when listening, in order to listen 'on axis', because that 120mm isoplanar tweeter does act as a line-source, delivering the highest frequencies as a horizontal beam of sound. Combine this with the waveguides and room reflections are reduced, so image focusing is tight. And since the radiating area is about five times that of a normal tweeter, headroom is substantially greater than usual. Most importantly, the top end is smooth, beautifully balanced and essentially very sweet too – lovely stuff.

Both the bass and treble extremes work very well, but the midband is the most important bit. Here the LS-77 demonstrates seamless transition from one driver to the other, exceptional overall coherence, and very superior stereo imaging, so much so that the steep slope filters used in the crossover seem to be entirely positive, while their inevitable complexity didn't seem to be any impediment to the sound quality.

The net result is a totally impressive loudspeaker that really does make the most of the simple two-way stand-mount approach, and gives very little performance advantage away to much larger floorstanders. It's essentially neutral, arguably a little understated perhaps, with good bandwidth, exceptional stereo imaging and dynamic range, and fine dynamic expression.

Though certainly costly, it's also quite discreet and very elegant. Good set-up flexibility and a fine ability to distinguish between the various components and accessories with which it is used suggests its Reference Class Professional Monitor tag is entirely appropriate. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Sensitivity (2.83V/1m in room):** 87 dB

**Long Term Power Handling (AES/RMS):** 150 watt

**Peak Program Power Handling:** 600 watt

**Impedance, nominal:** 8 ohm

**Impedance, minimal:** 6 ohm

**Frequency Response (in IEC Standard Room):** 26Hz - 40kHz (+/-3dB)

**Directivity Index (DI) 500-10KHz :** 6dB (+/-3dB)

**Low Frequency Driver:** 24.3cm/10in diameter, 10cm/4in diameter voice coil  
**High Frequency Driver:** 12cm/5in long isoplanar ribbon

**Crossover:** AMR OptiSlope® design (60 dB/octave)

**Bass Enclosure Principle:** Transmission Line Port @

**Colour:** Champagne or Titanium

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 25 x 49 x 31 cm

**Weight:** 35 kg (each)

**Price:** £10,995/pair

Reference Class Professional Monitor

**URL:** [www.amr-audio.co.uk](http://www.amr-audio.co.uk)

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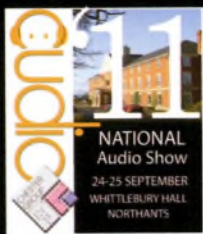


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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Consonance Reference CD2.2 Linear Mk2

by Alan Sircom

**T**his was going to be a problem review. I know things warm up, but out of the box the Consonance Reference CD2.2 Linear Mk 2 sounded dreadful. Put a hundred or so hours on the clock and the transformation is astonishing. Normally, you can hear the end result in a kind of raw form from the outset; the diamond in the rough just gets less rough with time. Not here – hour one; Clark Kent. Hour 100+; Superman.

For those with long(ish) memories, the Consonance CD2.2 Linear scored a hit with Jimmy Hughes back in issue 46. Aside from adding a new all-black finish to the light and dark wood cover over a silver-front, the player looks functionally identical to its predecessor. The centre mount transport over the display and remote control eye, the two large knob-like multi-way controls that respond neatly to pushes and pulls from the user and the heavy, silver dimples on black remote remain almost disturbingly unchanged.

At first glance, not a lot has changed under the hood, too. It's still a single-ended device, running a Philips TDA1543 DAC in 16-bit precision. The TDA1543 is a popular choice with the DIY brigade in their never-ending quest for the best sounding NOS (non-oversampling) converter, and in fairness Consonance has more than its fair share of NOS converters built into some of its players. Here, the player also gives the user a choice of upsampling frequencies, accessed from the remote handset. The original Reference CD2.2 gave the choice of just 44.1kHz and 88.2kHz sampling, this new player raises the game by adding a further 176.4kHz sampling frequency,

Consonance also points to a revised super clock for lower jitter figures. The player retains the same 6H30-based tube output stage.

Outwardly, aside from the new black finish, the big change is the addition of a single coaxial digital input at the rear panel. Joining the coaxial digital output and the pair of single-ended analogue outputs, this switchable digital input has been designed for use with the company's Transmitter Box 1.0 (not tested here), as well as a host of other digi-products with coaxial outputs. While not

*“The TDA1543 is a popular choice with the DIY brigade in their never-ending quest for the best-sounding NOS converter.”*

exactly turning the Reference CD2.2 Linear Mk 2 into a digital hub, the Transmitter Box is designed to potentially bring Wi-Fi to Hi-Fi, Consonance style. Whether you go for this box or not, an additional digital input has its uses in a modern CD player and this is a good upgrade.

With relatively mild changes to the Reference CD2.2 chassis and electronics, this is not the sort of alteration that would entail huge changes in the player, but what on earth gave it such a huge change over those first 100 hours? CD players sporting NOS circuitry (such as the Droplet 3.1 Linear, ▶

▶ the Orfeo, the CD-120 Linear and the DAC16 from the same catalogue) are all notoriously long-winded in their warmup times, but even so, there's nothing in the Ref CD2.2 Linear Mk 2 to make it so twitchy in its infancy, is there?

I suspect it *is* the lack of anti-aliasing filter. Or maybe the output stage. Or even the new clock. Truth is, finding definitive answers about such things is difficult in the extreme, especially as things like bedding in and warm-ups aren't even the kinds of thing you could legitimately pick up from a measurement suite. Still, that hundred hour move from woe to wow is something to bear in mind; if you hot-foot it back and demand a refund after giving the player an hours run-in, you are doing yourself a great disservice.

There seems to be a move to make digital very 'digital' sounding in some audio quarters. By this, some designers seem to blur the lines between 'detail' and 'brightness' (this doesn't just apply to electronics; there's a rising treble permeating some high-end speaker designs too; the cynical might say it's to compensate for the increasingly old ears of audiophile buyers). Fortunately, not everyone follows this line of reasoning and the Consonance Reference CD2.2 Linear Mk 2 represents the Loyal Opposition to the Brightness Party.

That doesn't mean the player is warm and woolly sounding, just that it does 'natural' instead of 'etched'. The information retrieval is all there, it's a detailed player, but trades some laser-guided precision for a sound that's dynamic and rather like what you might hear in a concert hall. I suspect this presentation – without doubt the Reference CD2.2 Linear Mk2's greatest asset – might be its biggest curse too, because the player's character is not of the immediate gratification kind, and in a world where the demonstration room is being replaced by the e-commerce site, he who shouts loudest, wins. I sincerely hope this isn't the case, because the sound of the Reference CD2.2 Linear Mk2 is eminently satisfying in the long-term, where the more shiny and bright sounding players are found wanting.

What it also has is air. A lot of air. Air around the musicians; not in the sort of pretty, yet musically diffuse way some products deliver, but just making musical instruments take their rightful places within a big and open soundstage.

The combination of that natural and airy presentation makes this one of the most refined players at the price point. How you react to that refinement

largely depends on your take on the need for refinement in audio; do you look upon this as blunting the edges or smoothing things out? Once again, I don't find this as musically-dependent, because the same things can be positive or negative to any musical genre; someone might listen to the *Live Through This* album by Hole and think that refinement helps cut the onslaught, or compromises its energy. It's all relative.

*“The Consonance Reference CD2.2 Linear Mk2 represents the Loyal Opposition to the Brightness Party.”*

All that being said, the Reference CD2.2 Linear Mk 2's gentle softening and filling out of the overall sound does tend to lend it more to the mainstream jazz and classical end of the spectrum. Spiky punk-jazz noises from Polar Bear still work (indeed, because they are the lo-fi of jazz, a bit of extra smoothing helps considerably), but are best elsewhere. On the other hand, listening to the classic David Wilcocks/Decca rendition of The ▶





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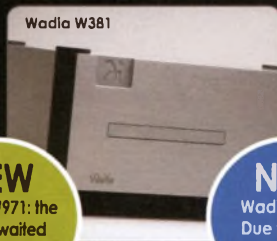
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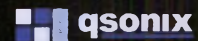
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- ▶ Nelson Mass is a remarkably satisfying experience, as the player 'digs in' and extracts the inner workings of the performance.

A lot of this comes from the player being incredibly adept at dynamic range replay. Not just the big majestic sweeps from *ppp* to *fff* that you'll get at the fireworks end of your music collection, but the more subtle dynamic interplays that frequently go unnoticed. The little shufflings and sighs and miscellaneous sounds that go to make up a live event are not pushed to the fore, neither are they hidden from view. They are just there, subtly explaining why a live concert can be a wonderful thing.

Curiously, what really swings it for the Reference CD2.2 Linear Mk 2 is the sound of applause. Often sounding like a form of pink noise, through this player you can hear proper applause, as if there are real people clapping. These people exist in a three-dimensional space behind the loudspeakers and aren't just an amorphous mass of sound. That realisation has a lasting effect on the listener, who quickly discovers just how much detail and information is there... and just how quickly that can be ruined by other systems.

*"If you've lusted after a 47 Labs or Zanden player, or one of the big Audio Note DACs, this is the nursery slopes edition."*

I can see the Consonance player polarising opinion. There will be many who strongly dislike the player on the grounds of it 'interpreting' the sound. In fairness, accuracy freaks will find little to attract them to this player; tubes in the output stage and no anti-aliasing filter will pretty much stop this group in its tracks on principle. Some more open to the Consonance ideas-pool will try this player and find it absorbing, but not engaging. But some will find its musical presentation utterly addictive, discovering the musical meaning

that can get lost in delivering the message with other players. Put another way, if you've lusted after a 47 Labs or Zanden player, or one of the big Audio Note DACs, here's the nursery slopes edition.

Perhaps the biggest praise you can heap on the Consonance line is that the products don't come up on eBay or Audiogon too often. This is no box-swapper delight, this week's must have only to be passed from listening room to listening room as it 'does the rounds'. This is the slow burn, the player that takes its time to show you how good it really is, and then never gives up. Give it more than a half-hour listening session, and you might just fall for it. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Non-oversampling, upsampling, filterless CD player with tube analogue output stage.

**Tube Complement:** 1x 6H30

**Sampling Rate:** 44.1, 88.2, 176.4kHz

**Outputs:** 1pr single-ended RCA  
1x co-axial digital RCA

**Output Level:** 2.5v

**Inputs:** 1x co-axial digital RCA

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 430 x 210 x 33mm

**Weight:** 1.6Kg

**Price** £1,695

**Manufactured by:**

Opera Consonance

**URL:** [www.opera-consonance.com](http://www.opera-consonance.com)

**UK Distributor:**

Alium Audio

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**Brian Damkroger - June 2010**

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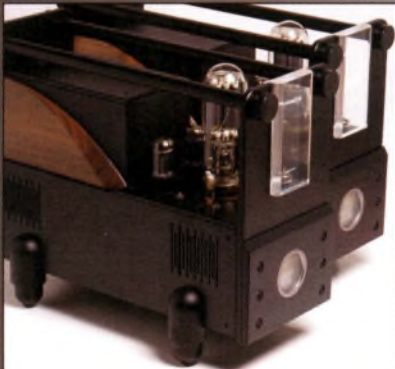
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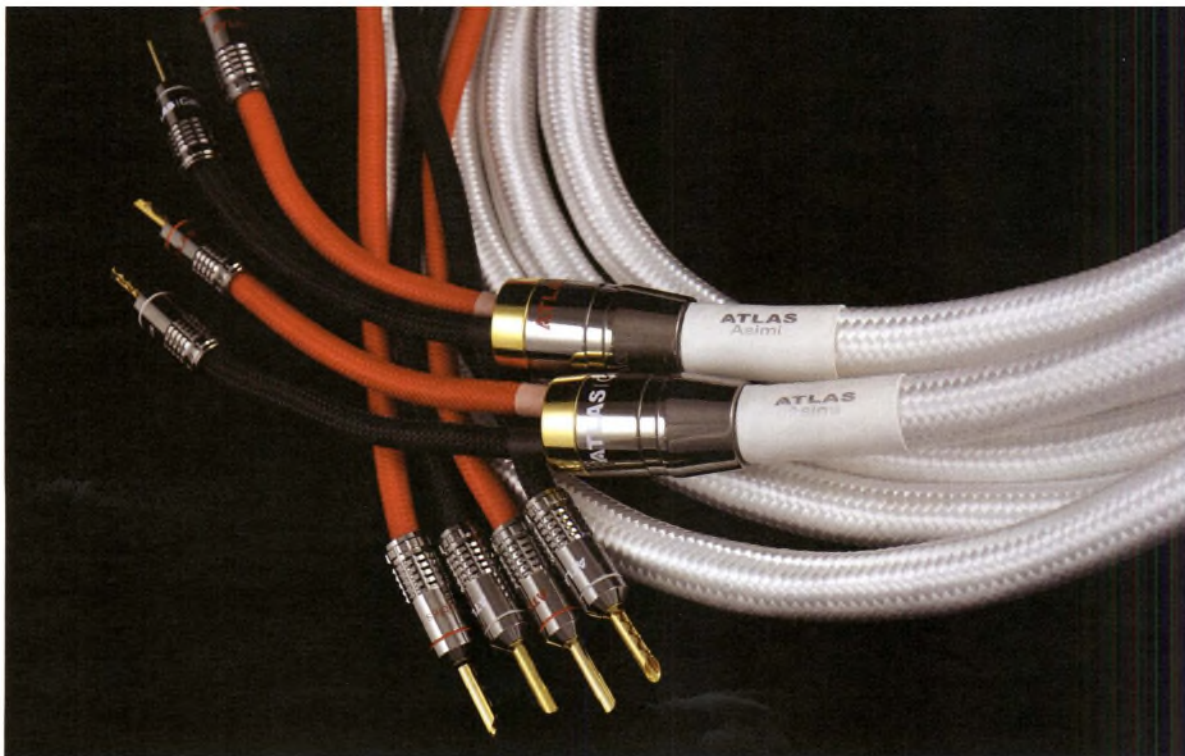
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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Atlas Asimi loudspeaker cable

by Alvin Gold

**T**here are some great questions to be asked about audio cables. Do they really sound different? And if they do, how and why? It's also worth asking why they cost as much as they do, but this is not a question that is possible to answer convincingly. It may have something to do with R&D costs, the use of exotic, expensive materials and/or production processes, but equally it may have more to do with distribution issues – if a maker sells only small quantities of cable, it probably can't be done economically. In this case, Atlas makes a convincing case that it is the use of relatively expensive materials and production processes that bear much of the blame, but it is impossible to be sure.

Asimi (which means silver in Greek) takes its inspiration from two sources, first and foremost Asimi interconnect, which was launched about a year ago, and secondly Mavros, the previous flagship incumbent from the Atlas stable.

Asimi takes the idea of OCC (Ohno Continuous Casting), a temperature controlled drawing process, previously used in Mavros) to the next level. Modestly, Atlas claims Asimi is technically and sonically superior to any other loudspeaker cable speaker anywhere and at any price. The aim was to use

pure silver conductors, which Atlas claims are superior to the more usual silver plated copper because it is completely homogenous, but it acknowledges that silver is often criticised for sounding bright and edgy thanks to its homogeneity, which Atlas believes is due in part to the low level presence of impurities in the silver, and also to the granular structure of silver. The use of 99.9999% pure OCC silver

*“The crystal boundaries in normal silver are reduced to about one per 700 feet.”*

(OCC stands for Ohno Continuous Casting), also used in the copper conductors used in Mavros, means that the crystal boundaries in normal silver are reduced to about one per 700 feet, so that the audio signals traverse a continuous conductor instead of multiple grain boundaries. Each cable leg in Asimi has two strands of three different conductor diameters giving six strands in all with a total combined cross sectional area of 3.5 mm<sup>2</sup>. ▶

▶ Perhaps more important still is the design of the insulation, which has an unprecedentedly low dielectric constant of about 1.5 – a perfect insulator (a hard vacuum) is 1.0, and free air, the next best, is about 1.2. PTFE/Teflon in its normal solid form has a DC of about 2.7 – 3.3, but the microporous PTSE, which consists most of air, reduces this by at least 30%. The dielectric constant also translates into transmission speed, and also its uniformity across the audio band, and it is this that marks Asimi out from the rest, with the obvious exception of Nordost Valhalla, which achieves a similar end, but in a completely different way.

And in case you object that the speed of light is a constant, it is only a constant for a particular conductor, for which the traditionally quoted figure is simply an upper limit. The traditional speed of light is normally given as around 300M metres/second, but this is the speed in a vacuum, that is empty space. The conductor in cables acts as a complex network, which has a non-linear impedance characteristic with inductive and capacitive properties, and as a result transmission speed varies with frequency, which in an electrical network can distort the leading edges of signals, especially at the high frequency end of the spectrum. In some (rare) cases the speed of light can dip down to little more than walking speed.

From long experience of Valhalla, and Asimi, it is this speed and uniformity that appear to be the main factors underpinning the way these cable perform. Asimi is undeniably very special, though not necessarily in quite the way I had expected. Sonically it is a fine grain cable, in some respects very like Nordost Valhalla, with which it share some properties, though its construction could hardly be more different. It has real heft and weight, in this respect reminiscent of the previous range topping Mavros. This sense of physical presence and boldness marks it out from the crowd, but so does the complete absence of grain or glare, which Atlas suggests is associated with many pure silver cables,

I am not yet in a position to say whether the sound will deteriorate with time, which is also a charge levelled at some silver cables due to oxidation, but this has not been an issue with Asimi interconnect so far, which I have been using for considerable period. It is also worth noting that so far at least the connectors used on Asimi speaker cable appear to be bullet proof, with a robust cable relief and no obvious signs of wear on the 4mm pins, which has been a persistent problem with Nordost. The cable itself is mechanically sound too: you can't easily kink it by bending it sharply. The only possible potential problem is that at 16mm diameter, it is quite thick, and as a result it may not always be easy to hide.

Asimi is the kind of cable you might want to use for critical listening, for example when comparing CD to SACD, which can and should sound more subtle and expressive, but which sometimes doesn't due to the inherent lack of resolution in many systems, which may be at least partly related to



shortcomings in the cables employed. Consistently, Asimi Speaker cable was able to resolve the fine difference in micro structure that give music its personality, human voice its passion and expression.

Whether you can be justified in spending the kind of money you will be asked for Asimi is not a question that can be readily answered. It is very expensive and you will need to suck it and see, perhaps by borrowing a set from a dealer, which is a service that he should be able to provide against suitable sureties, or large wads of notes of the realm. Generally speaking, the higher the resolution of the system, the more benefit will be derived from the cable. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Price:** £8,950/3m pair (custom lengths at £2,400 per metre)

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Lavry DA11 digital converter

by Alan Sircom

Some may disagree, but one of the great joys of modern audiophilia is that we now let pros into our little treehouse. Pro-grade equipment generally brings with it a healthy disregard for the wilder excesses of high-end construction (no inch-thick front panels, no specifications that would seem excessive on a communications satellite), delivering instead good, high-quality BS free performance. The Lavry DA11 comes from that no-nonsense pro world. Of course, you can add all the audiophile bells and whistles and the DA11 will happily accommodate such things, but remember it's built for a more down-to-earth clientele.

So, although the DA11 bristles with input options (USB, coax S/PDIF, Toslink S/PDIF, XLR AES/EBU are among the acronyms on offer), the explanations for their inclusion are remarkably pragmatic. AES/EBU, for example, doesn't bestow any magic better-than-coax properties – but is useful if you plan on using very long runs between digital source and converter. It only outputs to XLR, but comes with XLR-RCA adaptors in the box and it has a volume control (for headphones) that is just a toggle switch (a remote is an optional extra); unbreakable, but not the stuff of domestic dreams of user simplicity.

Similarly, the designer Dan Lavry isn't the kind of engineer who shows off what chipset is used; not because there's something to hide (it actually uses the AD1955 multibit delta-sigma chip) but because Lavry considers the performance of a DAC to be the sum of its parts and design, rather than purely described by the specs of a single component. Of course, given some DAC 'designers' just copy the chip-maker's application board, it's easy to see why many overstate the

importance of the chipset. Lavry designs intelligently and demands intelligence to be used in selecting a product.

The end user is expected to read the manual when it comes to setting up the DAC; although plug-and-play in the literal connecting to a computer sense, it needs to be correctly configured for your system. Set-up mode can be used to change pin configurations on the XLR sockets, determine whether the green LED numbers describe volume level all the time or display sample rate and so on. Five small toggle switches control the DAC from the front panel. The

*“The DA11 will happily accommodate such things, but remember it's built for more down-to-earth clientele.”*

installation process is almost reminiscent of programming computers in the days of punched cards, toggle switches and flashing lights... and those who remember such things with a chill will find cold comfort in the manual, which might read 'deep geek' to those unused to pro products.

Like the DA10 that preceded this model, Lavry uses what it calls an 'auto-Crystal mode' to lock to synch to the input signal. If the signal is sampled at (or near to) 44.1, 48, 88.2 or 96kHz, it will select the appropriate crystal synchronisation. If the input signal is not close to these settings – but is sampled ▶

▶ somewhere between 32-200kHz – it will fall back on a phase locked loop, but display the closest ‘Crystal’ sampling frequency. Naim uses a similar lock method in its own converter and the Salisbury Set has long respected Lavry DACs, so perhaps there’s some common ground.

Dan Lavry’s genius moment in the DA11 comes with the ‘PIC’, or Playback Image Control. Lavry notes that less-than-optimum loudspeaker placement can deleteriously effect the imaging. PIC works by introducing small and varying amounts of crossfeed to each channel independently, you can fine-tune the image width to attempt to restore what the original recording artist and engineer intended. Or at least, create an optimum image for your equipment. It also removes that eerie ‘musicians inside your head’ lateralization effect that some audiophiles find so unsatisfying about headphones. Naturally, this will have no benefit for mono recordings, will vary whether you are listening through headphones or loudspeakers and require a very different setting for binaural recordings, but the -3 to +2 width controls per channel do give a lot of scope for intrinsically better sound. A bank of presets, however, would be useful.

Lavry isn’t the first to come up with a similar scheme. The HeadRoom headphone amps also play the crossfeed game. However, these rely on analogue post-processing and EQ to alter the image, where the DA11 performs this task in the digital domain, thereby eliminating some of the phase trade-offs a more conventional analogue EQ system can produce.

Refreshingly, the no-BS approach extends to the claims made about the DA11’s performance. You can fine-tune the sound to improve imaging; this might not be a problem for those in dedicated man caves, but by rough speaker repositioning, I found I could repair the sloppy work almost totally with a mild image reduction in the right channel and a bit of enlarging in the left. This doesn’t highlight in specific recordings; it’s a universal improvement to your music, whatever (stereo) music you listen to. That makes it difficult to discuss the soundstaging of the DA11, of course, because it’s intrinsic to the sound of the rest of the system itself.

Overall, it’s a detailed, transparent and even-handed presentation. Interestingly, it’s perhaps the headphone users who get the most immediate expression of this; the discrete headphone amp behind that nickel-plate headphone jack will drive anything well, and not lunge into treble-oriented headphone-socket syndrome when using ‘difficult’ 300ohm cans like the Sennheiser HD650. It’s beautifully balanced. And lateralization is truly nailed here; my set of pro Sony MDR-7506 closed cans sounded like a pair of good open headphones.

As to the ‘auto-Crystal’ lock, that’s best summed up by something like ‘Done Somebody Wrong’ from the Allman Brothers’ at *Fillmore East* album. It just sounds tauter, tighter, faster and more driving here. The band plays as a cohesive whole and it rocks (well, blueses!) This is a tough call, because the band are playing slightly behind the beat, and this makes the extended middle eight difficult to tap your foot to with less ordered sounding DACs. Here, it’s as tight as a very tight thing, lodged in a gnat’s chuff. Where I don’t tow the Lavry line is that I don’t think all inputs are created equal here; the DA11 is great with AES/EBU, good with S/PDIF (both flavours) and OK with USB... not a big negative, but Benchmark, HRT and Arcam all do a better job with USB at similar – or even lower – price.

This is not like most DACs on the domestic circuit. If you are looking for stone-like simplicity, you’ll hobble your DA11. Approach it with all the care and attention you would to get the best out of, say, a record player and you’ll get just rewards. Toggle-switch volume aside, it also ranks up there with the finest headphone components you can get, too. If you like your sounds tight and ordered and rhythmically coherent, Dan Lavry’s your man!+

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Digital to analogue converter

**Digital inputs:** S/PDIF electrical (phono), S/PDIF optical (Toslink), AES/EBU, USB (Type B)

**Analogue outputs:** ¼" headphone jack (front panel), XLR outputs (rear)  
XLR-RCA adaptors included

Optional remote control (not supplied)  
THD+N at max volume – typical, 0.0008% FS, maximum 0.0013% FS

**Dynamic Range:** -112dB typical, -110 dB minimum

"earbud" type of headphones or similar not recommended.

**Volume Control Precision:**

Integral linearity (deviation from straight line) – better than 0.1dB

Differential linearity (step size) – better than 0.08dB

**AC Power:** 90-264 VAC, Frequency 40-63Hz, auto adjusting

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 20x4.5x27cm

**Weight:** 2.25kg

**Price:** £1,000

**Manufacturer:** Lavry Engineering

**URL:** [www.lavryengineering.com](http://www.lavryengineering.com)

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Shure SE535 In-Ear Headphones

by Chris Martens

If you polled a group of high-end headphone aficionados to ask which universal-fit in-ear headphones they regarded most highly as performance icons, I'm betting that Shure's venerable SE530 would appear near the top of the list. Or at least it would have done so until quite recently, given that Shure has now opted to replace its well-loved flagship with the new SE535.

At first glance differences between the SE530 and the SE535 appear subtle. First off, the SE535, unlike the original 530, features a detachable, user-replaceable signal cable. Lead wires for the left and right earpieces attach via small, gold-plated, plug-and-socket type connectors. Not only does this arrangement allow users to buy new cables should they ever accidentally break a wire (which, sadly, is surprisingly easy to do with any earphone), but it also allows the earpieces to swivel on the ends of the cables, making it *much* easier to obtain a comfortable fit. On the old 530's, the stiff lead wires tended to dictate terms to the user, meaning the headphone felt comfortable for some wearers but rubbed others (quite literally) the wrong way. The SE535, however, comes a lot closer to the ideal of being a true, "one size fits all" design.

The SE535 uses the very same two-way architecture and triple balanced-armature driver array (with two vented bass drivers and one treble driver) as in the SE530, but the internal shape and layout of the SE535 earpiece housing, which Shure terms the "acoustic network," has been revised to allow noticeably more extended treble response and wider perceived soundstaging. Unlike the original 530, the SE535 comes in two cool new colours: clear or metallic bronze, both very attractive (our samples were the bronze versions). Finally, the SE535's standard accessory set is somewhat different than the SE530's.

As was the case with the original SE530, the SE535's greatest strength is its smooth, neutrally-voiced, and natural-sounding tonal balance. But thanks to the SE535's revamped acoustic network, those bedrock Shure virtues are now coupled with newly improved measures of treble extension, openness and transparency. Together, these qualities give the SE535's a presentation that is at once engaging and detailed, yet also warm and relaxed.

The original SE530 was often quite rightly praised for its smoothness and neutrality, but even in its heyday it was



possible to find in-ear headphones such as the Etymotics ER-4P that seemed to edge out the then top-of-the-line of Shure 'phones in terms of sonic purity, focus and clarity. With the SE535, however, that "purity/clarity gap" has essentially been closed (and then some). Without losing any of the strengths that made the SE530 so good, the SE535 now reproduces high-frequency harmonic information and treble transient and textural details much more effectively, yet *without*—and this is the real stroke of genius here—sounding overtly bright in any way.

Rather than going for a huge increase in treble output, which could easily have done more harm than good, Shure wisely opted to go for a judicious, incremental improvement in the SE535—essentially taking what was already a very strong design and making it better. I think many listeners will appreciate the "first, do no harm" decisions that Shure's engineers have made in creating the SE535.

While fans of detail and definition might, and I admit I am one, might still wish for a bit more transient speed, more tightly defined treble textures, and even greater high-frequency extension, the fact is that the new SE535 offers significantly expanded performance envelopes in all three areas, so that to go further might be to risk taking things over the top.

To appreciate the SE535's overall balance and smooth frequency response, listen to it on a wide-range orchestral piece such as the Gordon Getty's "Plump Jack Overture" from *Orchestral Works by Gordon Getty* [Sir Neville Mariner, Academy of St. Martin in the Fields, Pentatone SACD]. This composition is roughly twelve minutes long, but in that brief span of time it provides a delightful and quite athletic



orchestral workout that is a tough test for any headphone. The “Plump Jack Overture” (the title is an allusion to the Shakespearian character Falstaff) starts with an abrupt series of concert bass drum thwacks counterbalanced with low brass and low woodwind outbursts, with angular string passages adding commentary up above. The opening section is a real head-turner provided your headphones are up to the task, which the SE535's most certainly are.

First, they do a fine job of capturing the weight and slam of the massive bass drum thwacks without breaking a sweat. Next, they do an unusually convincing job with the low brass and low woodwind instruments; instruments that pose problems for many headphones, some of which have trouble rendering their deep, throaty, full-bodied sonorities. But instead, the SE535 seemed almost to revel in handling the sound of these instruments, giving them the full, rich, round tonality they require.

But apart from handling these “power” instruments well, the SE535 can turn on a dime to exhibit great clarity and delicacy when required. At one point, for example, Getty's dramatic orchestration calls for a simple chime to sound, and the SE535's nailed its ringing overtones with a just-right touch of lingering shimmer that seems to float on the air for a delicious few seconds. Similarly, the SE535's showed real finesse later in the overture as they caught the incisive yet never edgy or strident sound of rapid violin bowing changes, and the delicate ripple of trilled flute passages.

My point is that the SE535 is a very well-rounded performer that is rarely if ever caught off guard, whether the music calls for big explosive dynamics, powerful yet also tuneful mid- and low-frequency sounds, or delicate treble details. This refined, “do-all” quality is a big part of the appeal of Shure's new flagship model.

#### Shure SE535 vs. Monster Cable Turbine Pro Copper Edition

- The Turbine Pro Copper Edition's single-driver design eliminates any possibility of driver-to-driver textural discontinuities. That said, the SE535 did an excellent job of integrating the output of its multiple driver array.
- Tonally, the two are evenly matched, though the Shure is warmer through the midrange and more full-bodied in the mid-bass, with highs that sound natural and clear. In contrast, the Copper Editions are leaner, but offer better extension at frequency extremes—especially in the upper treble region, where the Monsters can sound exceptionally lifelike (on good recordings).
- The Copper Editions enjoy a narrow but clear-cut edge in terms of retrieving fine layers of low-level detail. Some feel this imposes an undesirably intense listening experience. The SE535 offers what these listeners will likely consider a more livable compromise between smoothness and warmth, while retaining generous amounts of detail and resolution on the other.
- Both headphones are compact and comfortable, and both come with an unusually broad and useful array of eartips.
- The SE535's carry Shure's excellent two year warranty, but the Turbine Pro Copper Editions carry Monster's unbeatable “lifetime” warranty, which provides one-time free replacement of the phones “even if YOU break them.”

#### Shure SE535 vs. Sennheiser IE 8

- The IE 8 offers a user adjustable “sound tuning” feature. Some might question whether adjustable sound tuning is that useful feature, given that the IE 8's—when heard in a quiet environment—sound best with their bass controls set in the ‘Flat’ position. However, if you do much listening in noisier environments, you'll appreciate that the IE 8's allow you to temporarily dial-up their bass balance to help overcome background noise.

- Tonal balance for the IE 8's and SE535's is similar (at least when the IE 8's bass tuning control is set in the “Flat” position), though the SE535 offers a somewhat smoother and more coherent sound overall. In comparison, the highs of the IE 8 are extremely extended, but “dry” or “wiry.” In contrast, the SE535's highs consistently sound revealing, yet silky smooth.
- Both headphones offer an excellent array of eartips, though you may find you need to do considerable trial-and-error experimentation with either model to find out which eartips work best for you.
- On the whole, the SE535 is easier to fit and more comfortable for very long listening sessions than the more awkwardly shaped IE 8's. Again, the SE535's new signal cable design works wonders here.

Building upon the rock-solid platform of Shure's classic SE530 in-ear headphone, the new SE535 takes subtle yet sonically significant steps forward in terms of improved openness, treble extension, transparency and soundstaging. It is also more comfortable to wear and offers the convenience of user replaceable signal cables (meaning you won't be out of action for long even if you should happen to break a cable). In short, the SE535 is nothing less than a flagship reborn, and as such I count it as a surefire winner. +

*First published in Playback issue 36*

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** 2-way, triple balanced-armature-type drivers (two vented bass drivers, one treble driver)

**Accessories:** See above

**Frequency response:** 18Hz – 19 kHz

**Weight:** 1 oz.

**Sensitivity:** 119dB/mW

**Impedance:** 36 Ohms

**Warranty:** 2 years, parts and labor

**Price:** £470

**Shure Distribution UK**

**TEL:** +44(0)1992 703058

**URL:** [www.shure.co.uk](http://www.shure.co.uk)

# EQUIPMENT REVIEW

## IsoTek Syncro

by Alan Sircom

The lines between 'better power cords' and 'active electronics' blur with the IsoTek Syncro. Essentially, two sets of IsoTek's Extreme 20A power cable – one with a high-quality, cryo-treated Furutech 13A plug, the other with an equally impressive and similar spec IsoTek-branded IEC socket. In the midst of this is an anti-resonant aluminium cylinder the size of a large beer can. The cylinder contains what IsoTek calls a 'pre-filter'.

The Syncro realigns the power waveform. Modern day electronics do two bad things to the local mains; they pollute it with RFI (tending to make the sound less 'free' and 'open') and they create a 'backwash' from their AC-DC rectification (which ups the noise floor). So, where the AC waveform should have zero voltage, it's displaced slightly (usually about a volt or so), and this displacement is constant over the whole AC cycle. How this manifests in audio terms is low-level mechanical hum (sometimes not so low-level; some valve amps designed and tested under ideal conditions end up with transformers audibly buzzing in the real world), which can translate into microphony... and therefore increased noise. Filters and conditioners tend to treat the RFI problems, but – short of a heavy, expensive regenerator – there hasn't been much to knock out the 'DC on the mains' problem. And – as switch mode PSUs appear on more and more products – this is a problem set to increase.

Syncro knocks out this DC on the mains problem in one fell swoop, by rebalancing the AC sinewave, at once making the system capable of playing louder with less hardness and bringing out the low-level details. This is because it seemed to be better at leading edge attack, but not in an overtly aggressive manner. I have an old and modded HP Pavilion PC that is a perfect test-bed for this; whenever I power it up anywhere in the house, even the sound of my Tivoli DAB clock radio takes a nose-dive, and the big system takes on a raspy edge that is not normally apparent. Plug the Syncro in front of the system and suddenly it's restored to good form even while others are amending their Facebook Wall on the leaky switch-mode PSU of doom.

How big a difference the Syncro makes depends on your lifestyle. If, when you listen to your music, you studiously wait until everyone else has retired for the evening, systematically patrol your house turning off everything electrical aside from the audio system (and breaking into your neighbours and doing the same), then Syncro will make small improvement to the sound. If, however, you have a life and don't feel the need to listen at 3am with the rest of the house – and the rest of your neighbourhood – plunged into the



Dark Ages, Syncro makes a significant step up in performance. When you factor in the way it doesn't hold back the dynamics of a system and helps raise the game of products like the IsoTek Aquarius in the process, it's a no-brainer. IsoTek Extreme power cable is damn fine in its own right, but the Syncro can takes things to a new level.

The acid test of any component is what happens upon its removal. Do you say 'oh well' and put it back in the box, or do you immediately plug the thing back in place. The Syncro is very much in the latter camp. You know that magic audio quality you only get late at night? Syncro helps unlock that sound, whenever you listen. +

### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Cable:** 20Amps. OFC copper with active shield

**Connectors:** Audiophile-grade, 24ct gold-plated, cryogenically treated

**Blocking capacity:** 68.000 microfarads

**Peak current:** 300A / 10msec

**Permanent current:** 16A / 20Amp peak

**Price:** £875

**Manufactured by:**

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**URL:** [www.isoteksystems.com](http://www.isoteksystems.com)

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# record reviews

## How To Read Them

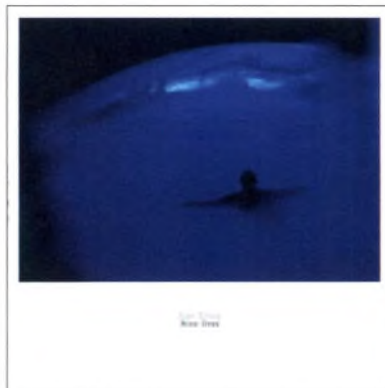
The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and – where possible – serial number. Beneath this you will find one or more icons which denote the available formats for the recording. The first icon refers to the format reviewed.

The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information, the scale rates a standard, good quality pop recording as slightly below average.

*This issue's featured reviewers are:*  
 Contemporary – Alan Sircom  
 Audiophile/Jazz – Dennis Davis  
 Classical – Richard S. Foster

### Key to Icons

	CD		120g LP
	Gold CD		150g LP
	HDCD		180g LP
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	Double Disc		10" LP
	DVD		Availability As S/H LP
	SACD		Vinyl Double Album
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	Multi-Channel		



### Alien Envoy

Nine Lives

Self Possessed C:DSP005 (CD)



Why former frontman of The Fat Lady Sings Nick Kelly chose to rename himself Alien Envoy for his solo project is something of a mystery. He's neither an alien, nor one of the diplomatic corps, and the music has nothing to do with Hawkwind, Rush, or prog rock.

*Nine Lives* was recorded live over a series of last Wednesdays of the month at Whelans in Dublin. It's a real collaborative effort; even the cover image came from the fans.

It's also an experimental effort, and that it's a hugely successful one demonstrated a high degree of maturity on the part of Kelly and his associates (including Briana Corrigan, formerly of the Beautiful South). I don't want to hang the label 'singer-songwriter' on Kelly, but these are well-crafted songs, written by a fine singer. Of the nine, 'Arthur Ashe' stands out, while 'Donnybrook' is the weakest, although not by much.

Best of all, the live sound is exceptional. There's a sense of musical freedom and close-knit ambience that no studio album can replicate. Nick Kelly's output is not 'prodigious' – this is only his second album this century – but he's clearly into quality over quantity. And these nine varied and fascinating tracks are likely to abduct your soul.

RECORDING



MUSIC



### Eric Clapton

Clapton

Reprise 9362-49635-9



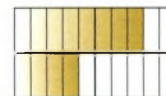
There is still a large community of Eric Clapton devotees who think he can do no wrong. For the rest of us, much of his output has been like an uninspired meal at a fine restaurant; there's the expectation of something wonderful, the appreciation of the talent and professionalism of everyone involved, but nothing can overcome the sense of disappointment.

*Clapton* is a combination of new songs, classic blues numbers and a few Great American Songbook standards, each one given the ol' Slowhand treatment. But where *Slowhand*-era discs were cool and laid-back, this album could have been sponsored by Horlicks. His version of Little Walter's 'Can't Hold Out Much Longer' sounds authentic, but half-asleep. Meanwhile, the new numbers are like well-recorded out-takes from his classic 1970s cuts.

As to the jazz standards... well, perhaps put those down to an artist growing old gracefully.

I'm probably being excessively harsh on *Clapton*. It's a very well recorded album, beautifully played. But I just can't help it; I wasn't a big fan of his 2004 *Me and Mr Johnson*, because it sounded tepid and insipid, but compared to this, it was the most exciting album of the last decade. This is one for the Saga tour bus.

RECORDING



MUSIC

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**Four Tet**

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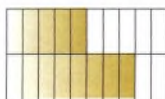
Kieran Hebden (aka Four Tet) is a Putney-borne electronic musician, a key player in the Folktronica movement. 'Electronic musician' is often a polite way of saying 'keyboards nerd' or 'programming geek', but Hebden is more skilled than that. He's a talented musician even when the power's off, and his skills as a drummer in particular shine through.

*There Is...* is the seventh album in 11 years. It's hypnotic and intelligent dance music; 'Angel Echoes' for example, will have you reaching for the CD player controls until you realise the sound is deliberately like a musical version of Jean-Luc Goddard's jump-cut editing. That makes it fractured and unnerving, but the end result is extremely musical and attractive.

In sound quality terms, electronica is never going to be demonstration quality, but the album is handy for checking out a system. A track like 'Sing' is going to show up how well controlled your system's bass is; fast, taught and precise, these are the ideal evaluation bass lines.

The dance music and electronica scenes are sadly a bit moribund at this time, now that everything's gone dubstep, but the likes of Four Tet prove there's still a few bright lights applying a bit of thought to the beats.

RECORDING  
MUSIC



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**Trans-Continental Hustle**

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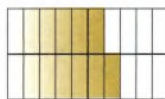


The fifth studio album (their first on Rick Rubin's American Recordings label) sees Gogol Bordello in fine form. GB is a hard act to fathom; every track sounds like it's an Ukranian Pogues tribute act doing mariachi reggae covers of songs that came eighth in the Eurovision Song Contests of the 1990s. in a good way.

Fronted by singer, guitarist and player of the fire bucket Eugene Hütz, the band blast through a baker's dozen of the most entertainingly chaotic tracks you'll hear all year. When they are at their best – 'My Companjera' and 'Immigraniada (We Comin' Rougher)' – it's instant party time. When they are at their worst, things slow down a touch – 'When Universes Collide' – and Hütz' voice can't shift gears and he ends up full of empty pathos.

The recordings are typically Rubin-esque; there's a lot going on in each track but not a cacophony of instruments blurring together. However, it's not so much 'wall of sound', but 'corrugated aluminium sheeting of sound, tagged with bewildering graffiti by a drunk with a mullet'. But this only adds to the entertainment and excitement. Gogol Bodello are just the right side of novelty act to make the grade.

RECORDING  
MUSIC



**JJ Grey & Mofro**

**Georgia Warhorse**

Alligator AL4938



Bluesy, funky, swampy and soulful modern Southern Rock; what more do you need? Well, how about an all-star guest line-up (Chuck Prophet, Angelo Petraglia, Toots Hibbert and JJ Grey's near neighbour Derek Trucks)? How about a real old school all-analogue recording at the Retrophonics studio in Florida? And what about an album named after an insect? It gets no better, people!

The best track on the album must be 'King Hummingbird', a classic slow build ballad. A decade or two ago, this would had an arena filled with gently waving lighters raised to the sky by the end of the first verse.

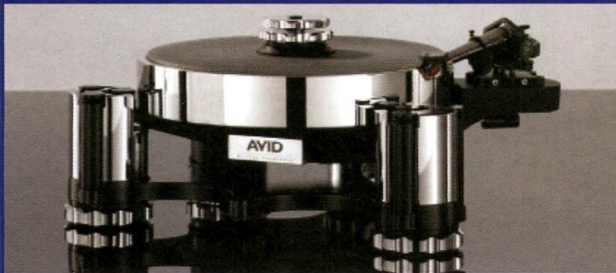
However, 'Slow, Hot & Sweaty' and 'The Sweetest Thing' aren't far behind, being respectively a slice of funk that Lenny Kravitz would be proud of, the latter sounding like a lost slice of classic Stax wax. 'Gotta Know' is similarly well crafted, but the backing sounds uncannily like 'Eight Line Poem' from Bowie's Hunky Dory. Curiously, I find the weakest track to be the opener 'Diyo Dayo', which is plodding. This is as much about track position as performance; if it had been about track eight, I doubt I'd have even commented on it.

The recording is demonstration quality too; clean, open and dynamic. Well worth checking out.

RECORDING  
MUSIC



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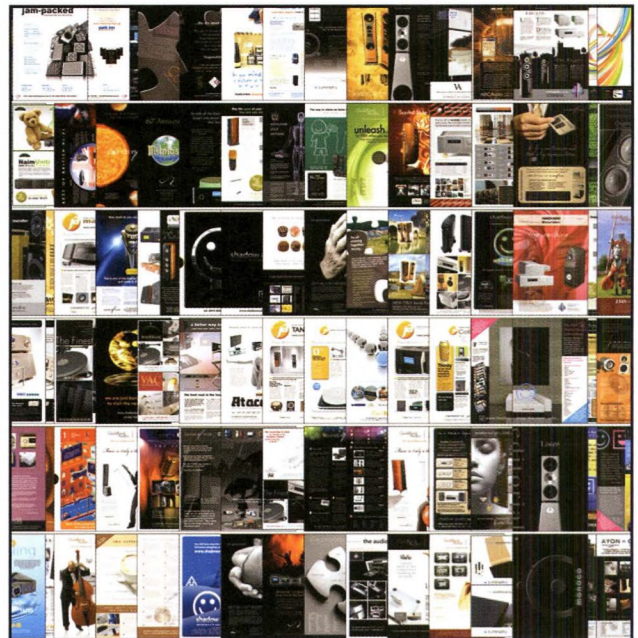
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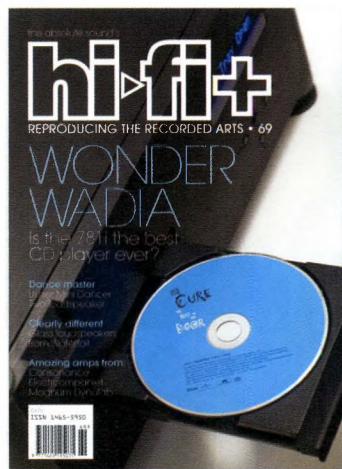
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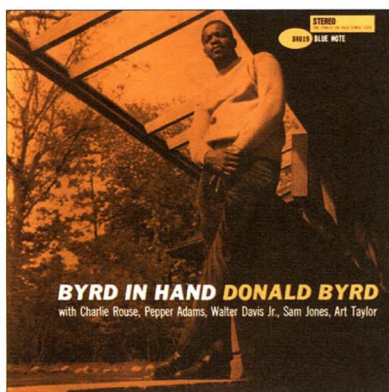
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## Donald Byrd

### Byrd In Hand

Blue Note/Music Matters 84019

45 RPM

It's almost impossible to keep up with all the Blue Note titles coming out these days. In this lesser-known but must-have cut, Byrd goes with a three horn front section including Charlie Rouse on tenor and Pepper Adams on baritone sax, with Walter Davis Jr., Sam Jones and Art Taylor supplying rhythm. Byrd and Pepper Adams co-led a group for a while and this LP could easily be attributed to either horn player.

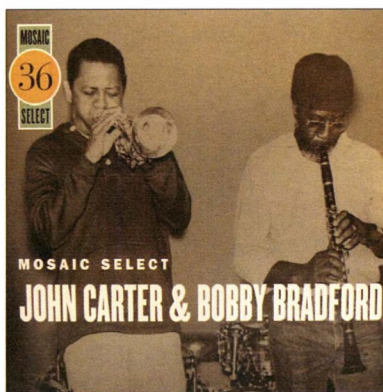
Both are magnificent on this session, Byrd's still developing and always underrated trumpet playing and Adams' hard bop baritone sax sound so different from the Mulligan and Chaloff schools of big romantic sound. Adams proved the big horn could turn on a dime and his performance here is a showstopper. Like James Carter, whose baritone sound is comparable to Pepper's when he is not going avant garde, Adams hails from Detroit, and I swear I can hear the Detroit sound in their horns. The Kevin Gray and Steve Hoffman mastering makes these tapes sound pristine.

My only caveat is the early stereo miking used by Rudy Van Gelder still makes me hanker for mono, even though I know the original is a stereo tape. But this is the cream of the crop, so my highest recommendation.

RECORDING



MUSIC



## John Carter & Bobby Bradford

### Mosaic Select 36

3 CD box set

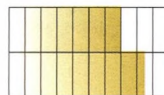
CD

Mosaic, the company best known for its lavish box sets of jazz LPs and CDs, embarked on a series several years ago called Select to issue scaled-back packages of newly mastered works at modest prices. And this latest package of avant-garde music may be the best set yet, as it collects works either never released or extremely hard to find.

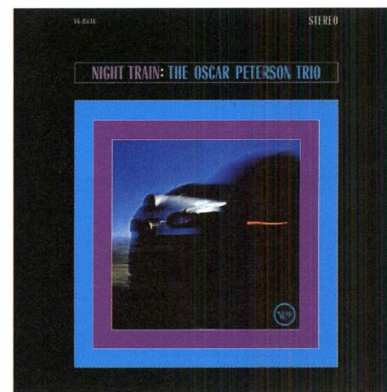
John Carter, who plays mostly clarinet but also a little alto, tenor and flute, and Bobby Bradford, who plays trumpet, were highly regarded freebop west coast musicians, who grew out of the Ornette Coleman mold. This package collects all the recordings made of them by Revelation Records between 1969-72.

For free jazz enthusiasts this is a major discovery. It's difficult music but pays high dividends for those ready to explore these three CDs. All the group sessions were recorded at Occidental Collage in Los Angeles. The duet CD was made at Westlake Studios in LA, the same studio where Stevie Wonder recorded *Innervisions*. The sound is excellent for music made on a budget. Clearly a lot of work was put into bringing these recordings back from oblivion and Mosaic once again deserves the highest encouragement.

RECORDING



MUSIC



## Oscar Peterson

### Night Train

Verve ORGV6-8538/PRG 029

CD

Oscar Peterson recorded so many sessions with his trio of Ray Brown and Ed Thigpen that I've lost count, but the quality of performance is consistently high. *Night Train* is certainly among the best sounding and most enduring performances. The album is a classic set of standards (including lots of Ellington arrangements), as you would expect with this group, with an emphasis on the blues. Each performance is a little gem, with the spotlight on Peterson's muscular piano work.

The session was recorded in Los Angeles in 1962 by Val Valentin, and has been considered one of Peterson's best sounding albums. The acoustic space is a little on the dry side and hence the piano sound may at times sound a little flinty as Oscar does know how to pound the keys—so if your turntable speed is off it will let you know.

The new ORG mastering by Bernie Grundman is pressed on perfect vinyl by Pallas and presented in a gorgeous foldout cover. The presentation is a little crisper and up front than an original deep groove original pressing, which has the piano a little further back in the stage and a bit warmer in sound. Either way, a trio record not to be without.

RECORDING



MUSIC



**The Complete Art Pepper At Ronnie Scott's Club-London June 1980**



Pure Pleasure/Widow's Taste  
PPAN012

This one has box set of the year written all over it. This is a seven record set with a 16-page booklet, consisting of Pepper's two-day set at Ronnie Scott's in London on June 27 and 28, 1980. It's the first time most of this material has been available in any format. The recordings were made for Mole Jazz, a small label started by the three owners of a London jazz record shop.

Two records were released under the name of the Milcho Leviev Quartet, because Pepper was under contract to Galaxy/Fantasy Records. In fact it was Pepper's quartet with Leviev playing piano, Tony Dumas on bass and Carl Burnett on drums. The master tapes were then forgotten for the next several decades until Tony Hickmott of Pure Pleasure went looking for them. He found that Art's widow Laurie had never listened to them and upon investigation found them to be in pristine shape. The tapes include five hours of music, consisting of 25 performances, only eight of which were released.

Pepper was at the top of his form at this (late) stage of his career. Witness his great sessions on Atlas recorded in 1980 and released on Japanese vinyl by Atlas, his Galaxy sessions in the late 1970's and early 1980's, his Artists House sessions of the late 1970s, remastered and available from Analogue Productions.

The performances in this box set deserve to stand alongside this select group of performances as being among Pepper's peak performances. One reason these performances are so polished is that Pepper had an (in today's terms) unprecedented time to work out the kinks.

The group has played together for some time before the gig at Ronnie Scott's and these two days of recordings were at the end of a two-week engagement. Most of the tunes are Pepper compositions, and most familiar to Art Pepper collectors. He sings about his cat (Blues For Blanche) and his car (Red Car). In addition to his alto playing, Pepper switches to clarinet occasionally, and although his sound is not as instantly recognizable, he's clearly comfortable on the clarinet and it makes for an excellent mix of sounds leaving you craving for more clarinet.

The included booklet (as well as the original Mole releases) advise that the recording was made using multi-microphones in a straight stereo mix without noise reduction, limiting, compression or equalization, and the clean, balanced sound testifies to the good result obtained by the three recording engineers.

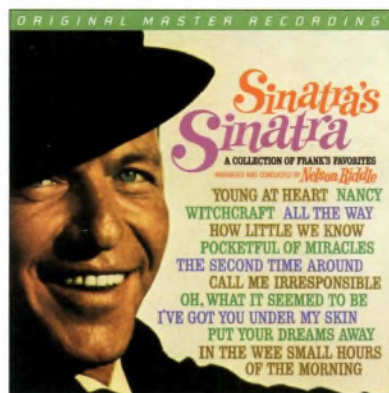
The crowd is unobtrusive and appreciative, and the live sound is about as good as you get from live recordings, indeed better than you usually get sitting in at most clubs. The tapes were remastered by Pure Pleasure regular Ray Staff at Air Mastering, and are up to his usual high standards. The included 16-page booklet is informative and includes several Pepper interviews.

This is a brilliant set and anyone having an interest in Art Pepper will want this box. Highest recommendation.

RECORDING



MUSIC



**Frank Sinatra Sinatra's Sinatra**



Mobile Fidelity/Reprise MFSL 1-333  
180 gram 33 rpm record

Mobile Fidelity is charging ahead with their second round of Sinatra albums. Last time around MF limited itself to the Capitol releases, but this time they are mixing it up with newer material from the Reprise years. In the early 1960's Frank decided to own his own music, and formed his own label. Capitol started releasing "best of" Sinatra albums and Frank fought back with this release in 1963, subtitled "A Collection of Frank's Favorites."

Allmusic Guide rates this as "entertaining if inconsequential" while Will Friedwald in his new book finds it nearly as amazing as the Capitol years. I don't find this LP inconsequential in the least. Frank's voice, phrasing and timing are not that far off his peak, the Nelson Riddle arrangements and backing are as good as anything from the 1950s, of course the song selection is excellent and the sound itself is comparable to the best of the Capitol sound. Better yet, this new half-speed mastering from Rob LoVerde is simply spectacular. Reprise made some pretty good sounding LPs in the 1960s but this is clearly a big step up on the sound of the original. Now if the Sinatra estate would just loosen its grip on the Jobim, Ellington and Basie collaborations.

RECORDING

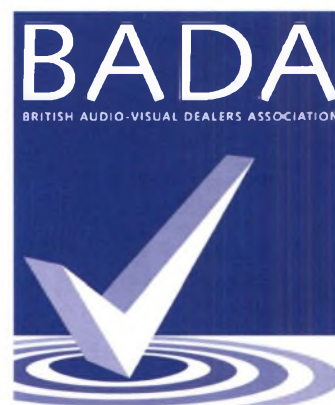


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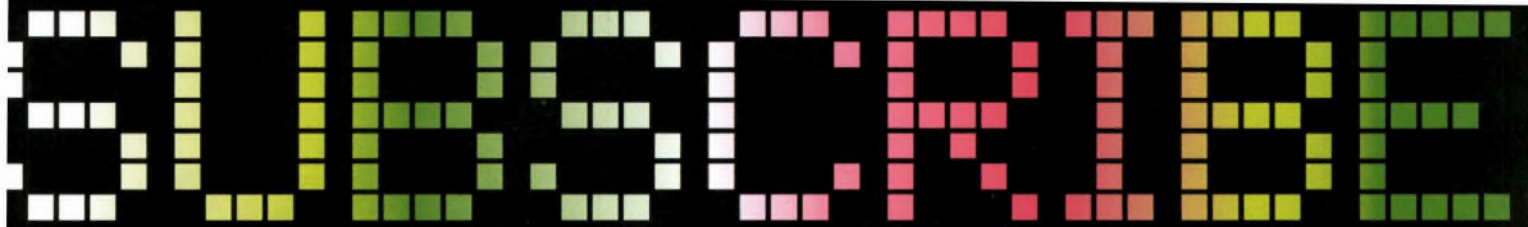
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**Respighi: Roman Trilogy.** SA<sup>(5.1)</sup>  
**São Paulo Symphony  
 Orchestra, John Neschling  
 (cond)**

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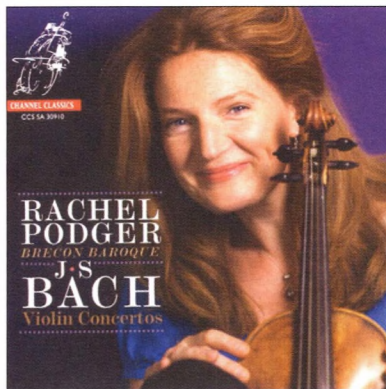
Having grown up on the RCA Living Stereo release by Fritz Reiner and his Chicago Symphony Orchestra, I was a bit skeptical prior to listening Neschling and his São Paulo forces. While there are some movements that don't win me over completely, I will say this is the best modern performance of these works I've heard yet.

These are very appealing works for large orchestra and Neschling et al bring out the flavour of these 20th century compositions to the fullest. Drama and ferocity as well as delicacy and insightfulness are key factors here. The sound quality of this disc is definitely of demonstration class and it is a great pleasure to hear how well this orchestra is recorded. I've heard these forces before and have recommended a wonderful disc of Liszt concertos in the past and now hearing these performances of well-known compositions I feel that this conductor and orchestra should be considered first rate by anyone.

There is no over-romanticizing here, just well defined, clearly interpretive performances that anyone should be happy to have. Most heartily recommended.

[www.bis.se](http://www.bis.se)

RECORDING  
 MUSIC



**Bach: Violin Concertos** SA<sup>(5.1)</sup>  
**BWV 1041, 1042, 1056 and  
 1055. Rachel Podger, (violin)  
 with Brecon Baroque**

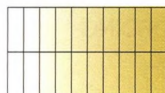
Stereo and Multi-Channel SACD.  
 Channel Classics CCS SA 30910

Podger is an outstanding interpreter of Bach. Her Sonatas and Partitas with this label have been mainstays in the catalog and have won numerous accolades and awards. She founded the Brecon Baroque (consisting of six players) in 2007 'as resident ensemble at her annual Brecon Baroque Festival.' Podger and her group create magical music making. The dynamism and insight this artist and group create is sampling breathtaking.

Podger has recorded many discs for Channel Classics. (Her complete Mozart works for violin for example) and Jared Sacks offers outstanding recording quality in these rich, silky performances. While I've enjoyed the Manze/Podger collaboration by H-M, I find this new set more to my liking. The pace is a little slower than Manze takes with the Academy of Ancient Music and this works well. I can't emphasise enough how important the sound quality is in fleshing out this ensemble and Rachel in the complexity of what Bach has written. This disc has enjoyed much repeat listening and I strongly recommend you explore this outing.

[www.channelclassics.com](http://www.channelclassics.com)

RECORDING  
 MUSIC



**J.S. Bach: Sonatas &  
 Partitas, BWV 1004-1006** 180g  
**Isabelle Faust, violin**

Harmonia Mundi Compact Disc  
 HMC 902050

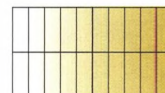
I am a big fan of the Bach Sonatas and Partitas and have strong opinions as to what I like. And Isabelle Faust moves me. She gave a performance of all six sonatas and partitas at Wigmore Hall in February of 2010 and I'd read they were very well received. I was delighted when Harmonia Mundi released this disc and I am eagerly awaiting BWV 1001 through 1003 to have a complete set of what she thinks about Bach.

Faust has a wonderful sense of timing and clearly finds her own distinct path using minimal vibrato. Her journey offers wonderful colouring and tonal texture and is a joy to behold. For as small an instrument as the violin, the engineers at Harmonia Mundi have recorded her very well and one is amazed at how precise her image is in the soundstage.

Her sensitivity and passion for Bach's music clearly comes across and I put her in the top class of violinists that I have utmost respect for. She is clearly in the league with the best of women artists today including Julia Fischer and Rachel Podger to name but two. A most enthusiastic recommendation.

[www.harmoniamundi.com](http://www.harmoniamundi.com)

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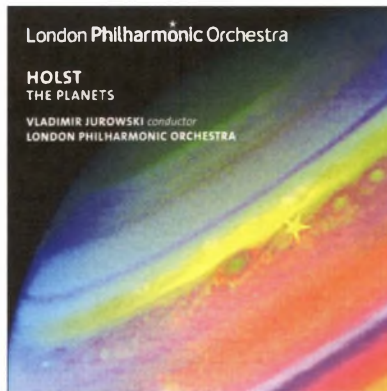
**Beethoven: Symphony No. 4; No. 6, "Pastoral". Budapest Festival Orchestra, Ivan Fischer (cond)** SA<sup>(S)</sup>

Stereo and Multi-Channel SACD. Channel Classics CCS SA 30710

I'm a big fan of Jared Sacks and the sound he delivers through his Channel Classics. I'm an equally big fan of Mr. Fischer and his Budapest Festival Orchestra. These are among the finest recorded and performed works I've ever heard. While I am a fan of an early vinyl release on Deutsche Grammophon with Carl Böhm and the Vienna Philharmonic performing the 6th (available on compact disc), I think I may retire that disc and replace it with Fischer's. Here's hoping for a whole cycle!

Fischer has changed the orchestra's seating arrangement, moving the woodwind players among the strings, so the individual soloists are always surrounded by the flow of Beethoven's music. The results are spectacular! While there are numerous recordings of the 4th on disc (Bernstein, Karajan and even Furtwangler), to my ears Fischer is pushing the envelope in a very positive way. I've already admitted to enjoying the great sound quality of this disc, and it also satisfies greatly in its interpretive qualities. Not to be missed and to be placed with your reference performances.

[www.channelclassics.com](http://www.channelclassics.com)



**Holst: The Planets. London Philharmonic Orchestra Vladimir Jurowski (cond)** CD

LPO 0047

These are very familiar works and my favorites have historically been performed by Adrian Boult with his LPO and Zubin Mehta with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Many recorded performances of these works are rather clinical and dry. Some seem to be released as 'Fireworks Music.' Jurowski allows the greatness of this outstanding orchestra to fulfill its ability to excite and delight the listener with every note.

The LPO has a very long history with this composition beginning with the first performance in 1918 (with Sir Adrian Boult) as well as with most every major orchestra world-wide (Boult recorded this twice for EMI and you should look for the 1973 release). There is something new in this recording that I've not yet put my finger on, but most definitely this is a very exceptional performance. The music requires very little introduction. Holst was inspired by Stravinsky's Rite of Spring and Schoenberg's Five Pieces for Orchestra.

The artistic quality of this performance, captured perfectly by the engineers in the Royal Festival Hall, is a recording that I believe will be headed for award status in some fashion. Highest recommendation.

[www.lpo.co.uk](http://www.lpo.co.uk)



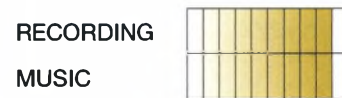
**Mendelssohn: Piano Concertos, Op. 25, 40, 29. Martin Helmchen (piano), Royal Flemish Philharmonic, Philippe Herreweghe (cond)** SA<sup>(S)</sup>

Stereo and Multi-Channel SACD. PentaTone SACD PTC 5186 366

Helmchen is a fine pianist and his recordings on this label have been excellent. His articulation is clean, clear and concise, with nothing 'glossed over.' Mendelssohn wrote his first piano concerto when he was 23. Even though Mendelssohn was an accomplished pianist, he found it very difficult to compose for this instrument. These are not often recorded works say compared to Mozart or Beethoven concertos. Helmchen has great skill and a clear musical direction and Herreweghe and his Royal Flemish Philharmonic deliver strong accompaniment and this makes these works shine and successful.

The engineers have given us demonstration quality sound, and even though there are complexities in Helmchen's piano, there is never congestion. While I have listened to the CD layer of this disc, as I suspected there is just a little 'more' on the fine quality SACD layer. There is more definition and this adds to the enjoyment of these works. I have enjoyed the playing and replaying of this disc and I think you will also.

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# Broken English – Marianne Faithfull

## every home should have one

by Alan Sircom

**BEING BEST KNOWN TODAY FOR BEING MICK JAGGER'S GIRLFRIEND DURING THE LATE 1960S IS DEEPLY DISMISSIVE TO THE CAREER OF MARIANNE FAITHFULL.** A talented singer/songwriter in her own right (she wrote 'Sister Morphine'), but people today seem to be obsessed with untrue allegations about Jagger, Faithfull and the atypical use of a Mars Bar.

Like many involved with the Stones in that desperately creative period, Faithfull fell into the Swinging Sixties lifestyle, and consequently spent much of the 1970s as something of a casualty. Her heroin addiction ended up putting Faithfull on the Soho streets for a couple of years, while her copious cocaine use (coupled with severe laryngitis) cracked and lowered her voice. Once again, the myth and reality don't match – her voice in this time has been called 'whiskey-worn', but it was her coke addiction rather than her alcoholism that caused the vocal change. At the start of the punk era, Faithfull was living in a squat with her then-husband Ben Brierly of The Vibrators.

This doesn't exactly sound like the foundation stone on which to build the apex of your career, but the end result of this turmoil was *Broken English*, her career-defining album. It's not an easy album to categorise, blending punk sensibilities with a classic rock smoothness and groove. It also is a New Wave classic and even foresaw the synth revolution of the 1980s. Far removed from her previous country-folk sound.

The eight tracks are raw and powerful, her edgy vocal adding a human edge to what could almost descend to synth-pop. It's not easy listening; between the Class A swearing and recreational pharmaceutical use, the themes themselves were hard to parse. Even the title track was about a world coming to terms with 'middle-class' terrorism and was dedicated to Ulrike Meinhof (of the Baader-Meinhof group), while 'The Ballad of Lucy Jordan' became a touchstone for frustrated housewives everywhere (it was part of the *Thelma and Louise* soundtrack). But it was the fascinating 'Why'd Ya Do It?' that really struck a chord with many people.

It's an interesting track both musically (how many other reggae waltzes in common time can you think of?) and lyrically, especially as was penned by poet Heathcote Williams. It's an uncompromising song about a relationship break-up long before Alanis Morissette opened her veins on disc. Even Joni Mitchell and Carly Simon didn't make the complaint rock grade to such an extent.

Curiously, the sound quality of the recording is excellent; so good in fact that the title track was briefly a demonstration disc for the flat earth brigade in the mid-80s. Faithfull's voice is

very well recorded, centre-stage and natural enough to bring out the pain in her voice, set against the staccato synth sounds and pre-Townhouse drum sounds. This is a hugely dynamic and exciting recording, even today.

Pretty far from easy listening, *Broken English* remains one of the best albums of the late 1970s, managing to cross the line between beautifully recorded rock albums of the time and raw punk/New Wave recordings. And it's by far Marianne Faithfull's best. Well worth checking out. +



### MARIANNE FAITHFULL – BROKEN ENGLISH

Island Records  
Recorded at Matrix Studios, October 1979  
Produced by Mark Miller Mundy

#### Track Listing:

- "Broken English" – 4:35
- "Witches' Song" – 4:43
- "Brain Drain" – 4:13
- "Guilt" – 5:05
- "The Ballad of Lucy Jordan" – 4:09
- "What's the Hurry" – 3:05
- "Working Class Hero" – 4:40
- "Why'd Ya Do It?" – 6:45

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